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NOV.

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A Complete Wayne Morgan Novel

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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An Action Story

By CHUCK MARTIN

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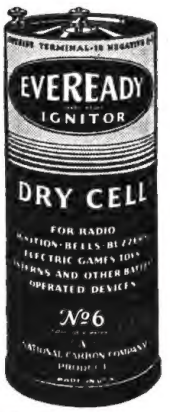

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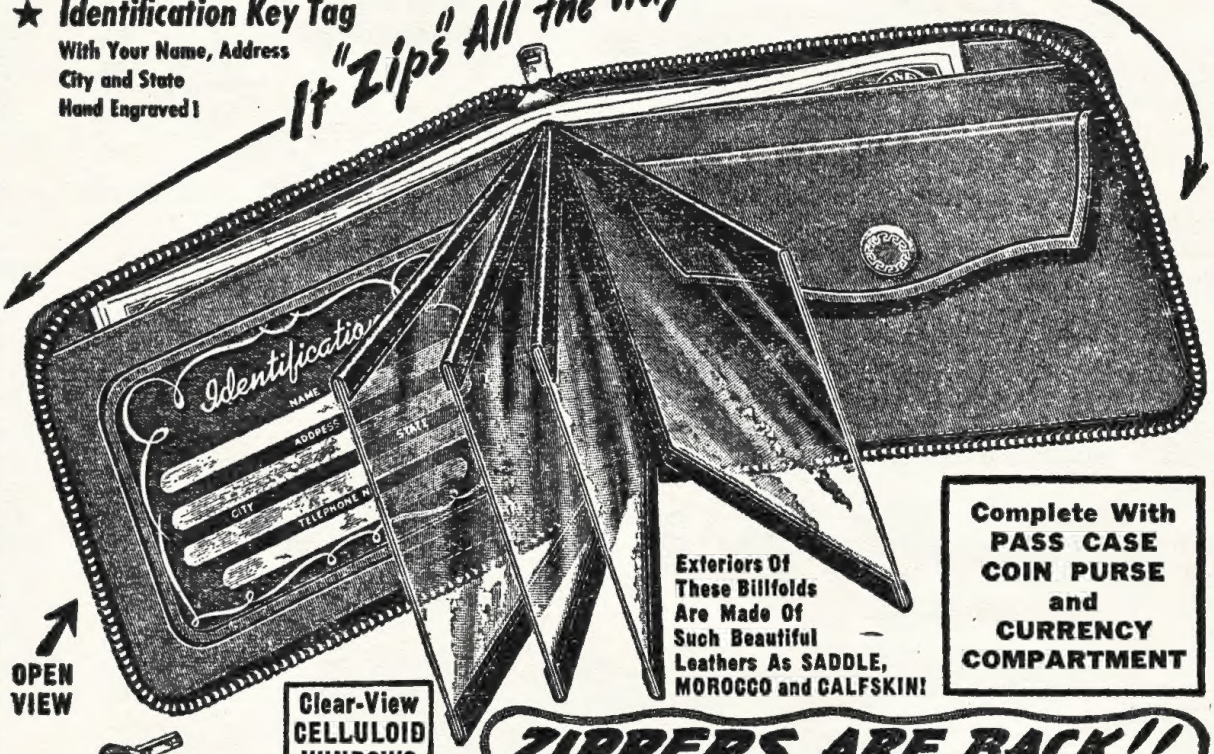

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A hiccuping practical joker gets his come-uppance

TWO SHARE ALIKE.....Cliff Walters 57
Gunsmoke settles the feud between Rick Alderson and Barney Cole

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Ranse Sigafoose hears the call of duty—and obeys its summons

And

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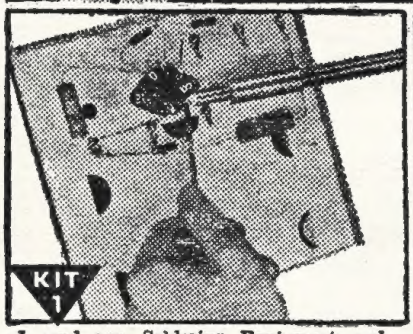
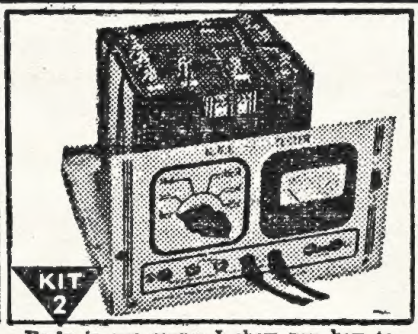
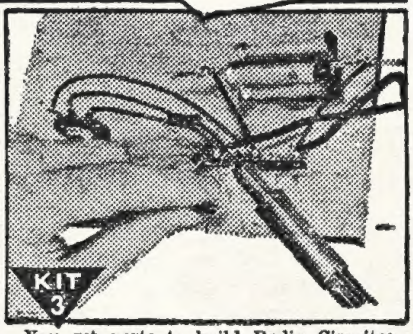


I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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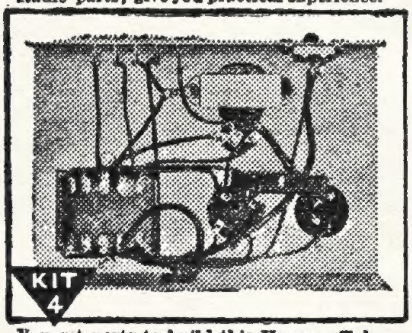
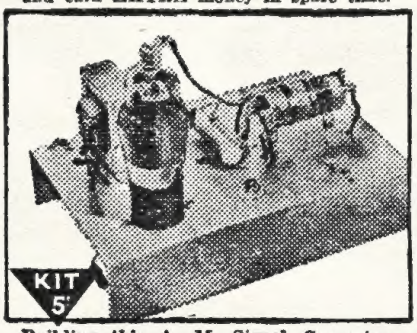
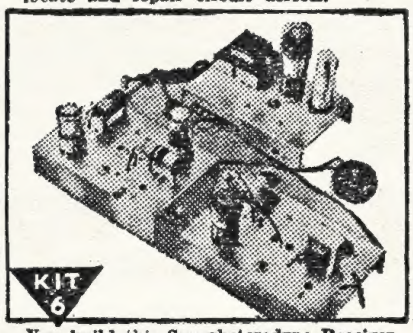


You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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GREETINGS, trail riders! Saddle your horses and we will be off on another trail ride and of course another Trail Talk. Those old time trails to the west which we are wont to traverse, although now cut up by paved thoroughfares, are still mighty interesting.

Those trails over which good and bad men traveled when the West was young still hold much fascination to those of us who love the West and its traditions, those of us who like to give thought to the brave men and women who helped to make the present peace and prosperity of the West of today possible.

Men good and bad played their individual parts in that great drama which might have been entitled the "Winning of the West." The trails they traversed in getting to the West were strewn with romance, love, sometimes laughter, ofttimes tragedy, and from these trials of romance and danger there come tales of human endurance, of courage, kindness and recklessness that will live on and on.

America's Oldest Church

Let us head westward through New Mexico, and while passing visit the site of the oldest church in America, the church of San Miguel, at Santa Fe. What a theme for a romancer, what a subject for a painter! How this picturesque old church looms up dark, desolate and weird against the sky! How worn and battered it is by the storms of years! How tremblingly seems to stand that cross upon its tower, as if its sacred form had withered like the waning faith which once so flourished in Santa Fe! What mute witness of a colorful past is buried in this old structure!

Santa Fe, the town, is the oldest in the United States. When the Spaniards discovered it in 1540, it was an Indian Pueblo; and a Spanish town was founded here before the close of the 16th Century, and nearly a generation before the Mayflower had cut the waves of the Atlantic with her daring prow.

Tradition says that the founding of this church of San Miguel dates from the founding of the Spanish town. Destroyed in part by Indians, it was restored in 1710 and was tolerably well-preserved when civic interests of the state and town undertook to restore this great and oldest man-built landmark of the country.

The oldest church in New Mexico and the oldest in the United States, it has been the center of everything of historic and churchly interest in that ancient Spanish town for nearly 300 years. It has looked down upon the rule of Spaniards, Indians, Mexicans and Americans, and it has sheltered all within its sacred walls, called all of them to prayer, and heard for more than two centuries their confessions and their litanies.

It has looked down upon death, upon conflicting foes battling to the death, and likewise it has looked down upon romance and love.

Land of Beauty

Let us take the trail on further westward into Arizona, the land of gorgeous sunsets, of beautiful canyons, mountains and deserts. Looking over this beautiful country, it is hard to realize that once its peace was despoiled by savage bloodthirsty Indians, by outlaws and cattle rustlers, and by range wars.

In fact the early days of Arizona were days

(Continued on page 8)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

of conflicting forces, of brave and good men trying to build a country and homes, of outlaws preying upon honest people and the dreaded Apaches taking the lead of all Indian tribes in trying to drive out or exterminate the palefaces who had dared to venture into their environs.

We leave the Santa Fe Trail and take the Cooke and Kearney trail or route to Tucson, the trail used in the early days when the pioneers were moving westward. Beyond Tucson we come to the Gila River.

In the big bend below the river, the Oatman family camped on their way to Utah. There they were attacked by the Apaches—who killed the father, mother and four children, leaving one son, Lorenzo, aged 14, stunned and presumably dead, and carrying off as captives two daughters, Olive, aged 16, and Mary Ann, a girl of 10.

The captive girls were carried northward into the mountains, and after a time sold to the Mojaves as slaves. They were so badly treated and so nearly starved that the younger girl soon died, but Olive was kept as a slave for six years, when she was finally ransomed and brought to Yuma and rejoined her brother Lorenzo, who had recovered from the injuries inflicted by the Apache raiding party and had settled in Yuma.

A Mysterious Citizen

We may visit the town of Williams, named after Arizona's most mysterious citizen, the old scout of the Santa Fe Trail. Where he was born, where he came from, no one seems able to tell, but he rode a piebald Indian pony, always carried a Bible in his knapsack and a long barrelled rifle either swung from a saddle holster or was carried across his shoulder. With this rifle over his shoulder, his elkhide shirt shiny with grease and dirt, he made a savage-like picture.

Bill Williams, in appearance, seemed to be

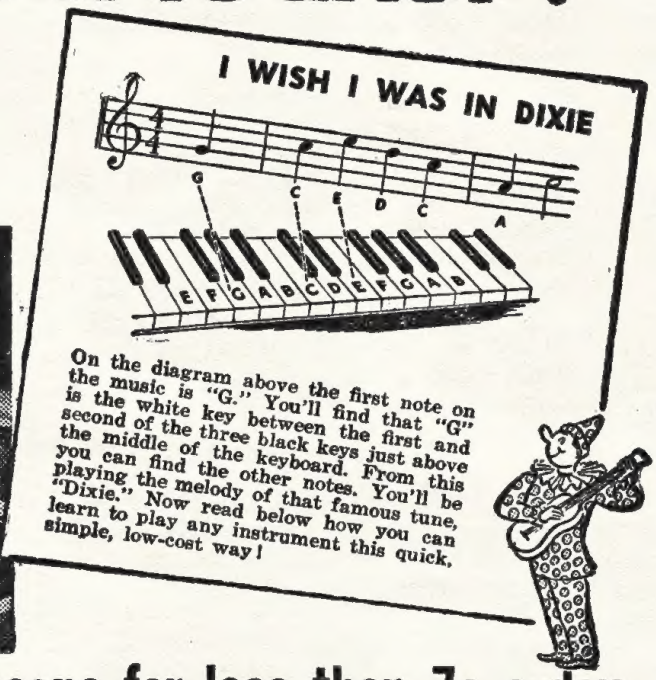
(Continued on page 71)

NATIONAL WAR FUND

FOR OUR OWN—FOR OUR ALLIES

LOOKS EASY... ...AND IT IS EASY!

—yet, it's from that famous favorite of the South, "Dixie"



On the diagram above the first note on the music is "G." You'll find that "G" is the white key between the first and second of the three black keys just above the middle of the keyboard. From this you can find the other notes. You'll be playing the melody of that famous tune, "Dixie." Now read below how you can learn to play any instrument this quick, simple, low-cost way!

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IF you are anxious to learn music but hesitate because you think it is too difficult, just follow the simple instructions in the panel above. You'll be surprised to discover that it is easy as A-B-C to learn to play, right at home, without a private teacher, by this remarkable short-cut method.

Yes, thousands of folks have found the U. S. School of Music method makes learning a pleasant pastime instead of a bore. No long hours of practicing tedious scales and exercises. No trick charts or number systems. With this method you learn to play by playing real tunes from real notes.

And everything is made so clear you just can't go wrong. First you read the simple printed instructions. Then you see how to play from clear pictures and diagrams. Then you play yourself and hear how it sounds. You start in with simple melodies . . . and gradually go on to more advanced ones. And sooner than you ever dared hope you're playing most any popular tune.

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As the man raised the knife to strike, quick as thought, Morgan drew and fired (CHAPTER XI)

GUNTRAP TRAIL

By OSCAR J. FRIEND

Wayne Morgan, Robin Hood outlaw of the range, rides into Sand Wells—and tangles with a roiling crew of battling ranchers in a fracas that calls for quick clean-up guns!

CHAPTER I

Sand Wells

IT WAS not Saturday, but the town of Sand Wells was crowded and busy when Wayne Morgan, drifting cowboy who looked more like a U.S. deputy marshal, rode in. He put up his big roan horse at the livery barn for a good feed and a grooming and walked along the main street. In spite of the throngs he had no difficulty, for people unconsciously stepped out of the way of this tall and broad-shouldered man in range attire. There was a certain air about him.

Morgan, headed toward Texas, had no particular business in Sand Wells beyond picking up a few trail supplies and getting a

A Complete Full-Length Masked Rider Novel

haircut, which he needed pretty badly. His dark brown, almost black, hair was shaggy around his ears and curling on the nape of his neck. He wore a pair of black-butted six-shooters in well-oiled holsters, but he wore them without ostentation. They seemed to be a natural part of the man.

Sand Wells was a railroad and cattle town. So Morgan was faintly surprised to see so many desert freighters. Until he saw the black-painted sign above a one-storied stone building that read:

GODDARD BORAX MINING COMPANY
Henry Maxwell, Mgr.

There was a knot of men before this establishment—freighting men, cattlemen, and a few of the town's citizens. They were crowding around to read a bulletin being pasted to the front window by a florid-faced man in khaki engineer outfit, complete to laced boots and stiff-brimmed Stetson. From the comments Morgan gathered that these men were not exactly pleased. Curious, he halted to listen.

"So Abe Meade refused the minin' company a railroad right-of-way," growled one man to his neighbor. "Might of knowed the old buzzard would do that."

"I don't savvy it, Lem," said his companion, obviously a cowpuncher. "I thought Goddard was goin' to take it up with the Territory Governor to condemn a strip of Meade's land for a spur line. Wouldn't hurt Meade's place none. Nothin' but sagebrush and cactus on the Old Anchor spread anyhow."

"They did start Government action on the strip through Eagle Pass, but Meade blocked that quick by filin' on that gold claim of his in the pass. Old man Anderson would turn over in his grave if he knowed Meade found the gold that Anderson always said was there."

"He spent a heap of time and money tryin' to find it before he sold that land to Meade."

"I never did understand that deal," said Lem. "Don't reckon young John Anderson ever did either. You ought to know. Yuh ride for him, Joe Blake."

"Yuh think there was somethin' crooked about that deal, Nolan?" a bystander asked Lem curiously. He was walrus-mustached Sam Trench, owner of the hotel.

"Nobody knows, Mr. Trench," Lem said. "Anderson's dead, and Meade won't tell."

"Shucks!" snorted Joe Blake. "Why can't the minin' company build their spur line around Meade's land then?"

"Because Eagle Pass is the only good way out of the desert this way. They'd have to build fifteen miles of extra track, and with twenty miles here to Sand Wells to join the main line, that'd be thirty-five miles. And it's only thirty miles from the mines to the railroad junction at Cedar."

"I reckon Sand Wells is goin' to lose the minin' freight business," opined Blake with a sigh.

"Excuse me, gents," said Wayne Morgan, as he moved up a step, "but what I heard yuh say is right interestin'. Just what is the argument?"

All three men surveyed him.

"Stranger," Lem Nolan said, "there ain't no argument. It's just plain cantankerous polecat. Know where Dutchman's Desert is?"

"Somewheres north of here, ain't it?" said Morgan.

"Twenty miles. The Goddard outfit mines borax there and freights it by wagon down through Eagle Pass to the railroad here at Sand Wells. They want to build a spur line, but Abe Meade won't let 'em have a right-of-way. He's gettin' rich chargin' toll on the freight wagons across his land."

"Shut up, Lem," Blake suddenly said. "Henry Maxwell's goin' to say somethin'."

The florid-faced man who had been pasting up the bulletin had turned to face the angry men.

"Well men," he said, "this is the latest ruling on our proposed spur railroad. Everybody south of Abraham Meade—from John Anderson to Faro Thorpe, who owns the freight yard site here in town—has given a reasonable option to the mining company on a right-of-way. And we thought we had Meade stopped till he filed on a gold claim in the pass."

"Eagle Pass is plenty wide, Mr. Maxwell," declared a burly freighter. "A thirty-foot strip for a railroad right-of-way wouldn't hurt Meade's minin' none. The freight wagons are usin' the pass trail right along."

Maxwell shoved back his hat in an exasperated gesture.

"True enough, Higgs," he said, "but we have a contract with Meade for wagon traffic at fifty cents per load. The railroad wouldn't hurt, but the condemnation of the land is blocked. Now we'll have to force Meade to sell to the company or make a deal of some sort. As manager of the company I must tell you that we can't proceed with legal action."

"What yuh goin' to do?" demanded Lem Nolan loudly.

"Try to compromise with Meade," said

Maxwell grimly. "If we can't, we'll have to build our spur line to Cedar, after all."

"And Sand Wells will lose the borax business—the big plant yuh was goin' to build here, and all?" protested Sam Trench.

"I'm afraid that is so, Mr. Trench," said Maxwell.

"That ain't fair," declared Blake angrily. "One man bein' able to block progress that means a lot to a whole town."

"No, it ain't!" agreed Trench with vehemence. "Us citizens ought to do somethin' about this."

Wayne Morgan glanced around at the angrily muttering men. He smiled slightly.

"There's just one thing you fellers seem to be overlookin'," he drawled. "This Abe Meade gent does own the land yuh're talkin' about. Yuh can't take it away from him by force."

"That's what you think!" Trench shouted hotly. "I'm goin' to call a meetin' of business men and ranchers. . . Say, who are you, anyhow?"

"The name is Morgan," the tall cowboy said, softly. "And yuh're right, Mr. Trench. I'm a stranger here, so this ain't any of my affair. I was just showin' how this business might look to an outsider."

Two or three men growled and turned toward Morgan.

"Wait, men!" Maxwell said quickly, glancing keenly at Morgan. "This man's right. You folks better leave this matter to the Goddard outfit. We appreciate your interest, but the company can fight its own battles. There's more than one way to skin a cat."

Maxwell urged the group to disperse, and they broke up in knots of twos and threes, indignantly discussing the situation. Morgan shrugged and started across the dusty street toward the barber shop.

Local politics. He knew the set-up. The pattern never changed, because human nature didn't. Only the bone of contention varied. In this case, it was the right-of-way through a man's property. The mining company was trying to get it for nothing, and the owner was trying to hold them up for an exorbitant price. Neither was right and neither was wrong.

WAYNE MORGAN

It was just one of those things. Change the prize for cattle, or water, or grass, or range rights, and Wayne Morgan had seen a hundred such situations in a hundred localities of the growing West.

At least there was no outlawry in this Sand Wells affair, no crookedness, no oppres-

sion, no miscarriage of justice—for a change. There wasn't even a land-greedy banker foreclosing on somebody's homestead.

Distinctly, as Morgan himself had said, it was none of his business—and so often in the years since he had traveled all over the West oppression and injustice had been his business. He had made it such. For all those years he had fought on the side of law and order, bringing peace to many a range with his guns, if need be.

BUT his methods were so unorthodox, never being prescribed by red tape, that he had long since been listed as an outlaw, with a price on his head. For the tall cowboy, the drawling-voiced Wayne Morgan, was none other than the famous—or as some called it, the notorious—Masked Rider of the West, a man feared by criminals, but blessed by the oppressed to whom he brought hope and a surcease from unjust burdens.

Little was known of the black-clad rider who seemed to have an uncanny knack of showing up wherever his services might be most needed, and in the nick of time. It was known only that he wore a black domino and flowing black cape, that he rode a magnificent black stallion called Midnight, and that his constant companion on his travels was a Yaqui Indian he called Blue Hawk. It was known that his guns had rarely been matched in accuracy, that he could be ruthless with evil-doers, but as gentle as a lamb with the deserving.

Aside from that, nobody knew anything about this fantastic figure who rode the outland trails with blazing guns, ever coming to the aid of the helpless and down-trodden. Certainly no one, except Blue Hawk, knew that the Masked Rider and the drifting cowboy, Wayne Morgan, were the same. His rôle of Morgan was one he often found convenient when making a reconnaissance, and often it was to his advantage to take a job with some cow outfit as Morgan, which he could easily do since he was a tophand.

Also, as Morgan, he could always drift into any town safely, free to come and go as he pleased. Which had been the case now that he was in Sand Wells, for only a night or two before, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had arrived in the vicinity, where they had found a hide-out in the wild country. Running short of supplies, the Masked Rider had become Wayne Morgan and ridden into Sand Wells to replenish their trail-food before riding on toward Texas.

In their wanderings, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had become as close as any two men who shared constant danger could be, but even the Yaqui knew nothing of the past of the black-clad man for whom he would have laid down his life. All the Indian knew was that the Masked Rider was the scourge of evil-doers, and that he worked only for good, stepping in when the Law could not or would not function.

Because of his activities, the Masked Rider had many times been blamed for bloody crimes he had not committed, crimes by others who had taken advantage of his mystery. But this was a misfortune that he accepted, and Blue Hawk was content that it was so. Riding like the wind on the famous Midnight, the Masked Rider defended the weak and injured, delivering them from danger and tyranny. Roaming the trackless plains of the West, a homeless nomad, the Robin Hood outlaw avenged the innocent, administered his own brand of justice and exacted retribution.

Now, crossing the street toward the barber shop, Wayne Morgan had all but put the matter of the right-of-way that was disturbing the town's citizens from his mind when he heard a hail behind him.

"Hey there, stranger!"

Morgan halted and turned his head. The manager of the mining company was beckoning to him. He retraced his steps, aware that Henry Maxwell was sizing him up keenly. He had already sized up Maxwell, seeing in him a resourceful individual with sharp gray eyes and a jutting jaw which hinted of a bit of ruthlessness should occasion demand.

"I'd like to talk to you for a minute," Maxwell said. "You said your name is Morgan? Maxwell is mine. Come on into the office."

Morgan followed Maxwell to his private office.

The mine manager closed the door.

"Sit down, Marshal," he said heartily.

"Morgan's the name," Morgan calmly corrected as he took a chair.

"Yes, I know," was the cool retort. "I didn't mean just that."

"Yuh think I'm a lawman?" said Morgan.

"Aren't you?" Maxwell said as directly.

"Nope—not exactly." Morgan smiled slightly. If this man only knew!

"I see," commented Maxwell, his tone plainly showing that he did not. "Just passing through, eh?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Where from?"

"West," Morgan said pleasantly.

"Where are you heading?"

"East."

"Uummm—you wouldn't be interested in riding north, would you?"

"I hadn't figgered on it."

"I don't suppose you'd be interested in a good job, either," remarked Maxwell, with faint irony.

"Not especially," drawled Morgan. "Why?"

The Masked Rider leaped around Maxwell and fired (CHAPTER XIV)

MAXWELL considered him for a moment, frowning. Then he relaxed and smiled.

"Frankly, here's the situation," he said. "You heard some of it. The Goddard outfit is developing a good borax mine in Dutchman's Desert about twenty miles north of here. Sand Wells is our logical railroad outlet. But a dry rancher by the name of Meade owns a long and wide strip of land adjoining the desert. We've been having plenty of boundary trouble with the old coyote. He claims his property laps over desert land filed on by the company. To keep his stringy cattle off our property, we had to erect a fence. Meade moved the fence out to enclose a couple of water-holes we need. One thing's brought on another, and—"

"Not to mention the wagon freightin' contract," suggested Morgan dryly.

"Yes, not to mention that. But Meade can't welsh on that until the contract expires next year."

"When yuh'll have yore tail caught in a crack," said Morgan, "unless yuh can make some deal with Meade."

"Well, baldly—yes," admitted Maxwell, compressing his lips. "The only alternative would be to open a new trail route to Cedar, on the northern railroad line, and that's out of the question. . . Say, you're pretty shrewd for a drifting cow puncher."

"Oh, I just sort of have the knack of sizin' up a situation," drawled Morgan. "Just how does all this tailor down to fit me?"

Maxwell reflected while his sharp eyes bored into Morgan's, then he plunged.

"The Goddard Company isn't a small outfit," he said. "We draw enough water for the Territorial Governor to be likely to send an investigator here to consider our claims. Now if a stranger by the name of Morgan was just casually looking around, I'd be a fool if I didn't arrange it for him to see matters in a fair and square light. Goddard hasn't anything to hide. All we want is an equitable settlement on a right-of-way. It's going to cost plenty of money to build that spur line."

"And if a feller by the name of Morgan didn't happen to be interested?" prompted Morgan.

Maxwell's eyes narrowed, and he spoke tersely.

"Then I might need a first-class gun toter on my pay-roll to handle the trouble brewing with Abraham Meade. We've got to get that right-of-way!" He finished significantly, "I pay good wages—in certain cases."

Deliberately Morgan got to his feet.

"Thanks for yore confidence, Mr. Maxwell," he said gravely, "but I'm not yore man. I'll be trailin' before sundown."

Maxwell looked somewhat taken aback.

"I guess I'm not as smart as I thought I was at pegging men," he grunted. "If you change your mind, you'll find me here or at the hotel."

CHAPTER II

A Coffin for Somebody

SOBERLY Wayne Morgan crossed the street, reflecting on what he had learned. Then he shrugged his wide shoulders in dismissal of the entire business. If he took sides it would certainly not be for a rich mining corporation. And it didn't look as though the wily old Abe Meade deserved—or needed—any help.

The sound of a hammer made him look up before he reached the barber shop. He was crossing before an open gateway in a high board fence. The fence adjoined a sturdy frame building with a painted sign across the false front which read:

SAND WELLS FUNERAL PARLOR
ALSO CARPENTRY
Ebenezer Snodgrass, Prop.

Morgan smiled at the incongruity of the sign, then peered in through the gate. At a wide doorway in the side of the building, with a narrow flight of steps at one end, a pine box lay across a pair of sawhorses. A bald-headed man wearing a carpenter's apron was busily putting the finishing touches to the long box.

On impulse, Morgan entered the yard. A row of small tombstones stood against the house, and under a shed were a buggy and a hearse. Sounds and smell of horses came from a barn, and lumber was piled up in a couple of racks.

Morgan approached the doorway and ascended the narrow steps. The carpenter finished driving a nail before he looked up. And then Morgan stared into the saddest face he had ever seen. The bald-headed gent was about sixty, short and fat. His body was built for jolly laughter. But his movements were solemn and his face, which should have been that of a cherub, was as lugubrious as that of an evangelist who had lost his last convert.

"Howdy, sir," he said in a mournful, singsong voice. "What can I do for you?"

Morgan almost stumbled over a small headstone inside the door. He glanced at the nearly completed coffin. Beyond it was a half-finished child's crib.

"Yuh're Mr. Snodgrass, I take it," Morgan said.

"That I be—Ebenezer Snodgrass, at yore

service," responded the old man in his mournful, nasally plaintive singsong.

"I'll bet yuh sang tenor in church when yuh was young," said Morgan.

"High tenor," agreed Snodgrass.

"A man of many talents," said Morgan gravely. "Stoneman, carpenter, and undertaker. A crib and a coffin. Yuh sort of cover things from the cradle to the grave."

"I help out the barber next door on Saturday afternoon," supplied Snodgrass, preparing to tack a piece of beading on the coffin for trim.

"Today seems like Saturday—judgin' from the crowds," observed Morgan.

"Pay-day yestiddy at the borax mine," informed Snodgrass, and went on with his tacking job.

Morgan was beginning to like this tragic little old troll in whom there wasn't a spark of humor.

"Now then," said Snodgrass, laying his hammer down on the coffin, "what was it yuh wanted, friend?"

Morgan had opened his lips to admit that he was not in the market for anything this side of the barber shop when his eyes fell on the headstone marker near the steps. As he read the newly cut inscription, his eyes widened.

ABRAHAM MEADE
THE TEXAS HELLION
BORN 1831
DIED ———

Snodgrass contemplated Morgan owlishly.

"Yuh're a stranger," he said. "Don't recall ever seein' yuh in Sand Wells."

The tall cowboy recovered himself and looked down at the fat little undertaker's round face.

"That's right, Mr. Snodgrass, and I don't reckon I need anything but a little information. My name's Morgan. Seems to me that I've heard of this Abraham Meade. When did he die? Yuh haven't cut the last date on that marker."

"Eh? Oh! Meade ain't dead so far as I know."

"Ordered his tombstone ahead of time?"

"Nope," Snodgrass said sadly. "Seldom comes to Sand Wells."

"Then what—" Morgan was at a loss.

"The marker and coffin go together," supplied the undertaker. "Special order."

"What? Is this a joke?"

"Not for a hundred and twenty-five dollars, paid in advance. I sell lots in the town cemetery, too."

"But who ordered this coffin?" exclaimed Morgan.

"John Anderson—last week. Neighbor to Meade. His PDQ spread lies just south of Meade's place. Anderson's daddy used to own both outfits before he sold the Old Anchor to Meade."

MORGAN leaned against the door jamb and began building a cigarette with meticulous care.

"Look, Mr. Snodgrass," he said gently, "folks don't go around orderin' coffins for others who ain't dead. That might lead a feller into a peck of trouble."

"Don't reckon yuh mean me."

"I was thinkin' of this John Anderson jigger."

"Knew yuh couldn't mean me," said the undertaker. "Nothin' illegal in what I do. Anderson paid for the work, and every man gets what he pays Ebenezer Snodgrass for. I'll cut a date in that stone when John gives it to me. None of my business what name he wants carved, Abraham Meade, Abraham Lincoln, John Doe, or the king of China. . . Say, it strikes me yuh're a mighty curious gent, Morgan."

"I am," Morgan coolly admitted. "And I'm right curious about John Anderson."

"Nothing curious about John except that he drinks and gambles too much, lettin' his ranch go to pot. John's kind of wild when he gets to drinkin'. His grudge against Meade don't come out 'cept when he gets his skin full of red-eye. Swears he'll kill Abe Meade some day, and everybody knows John Anderson's man enough to do it."

"Does that take courage?" asked Morgan. "Anybody can pull a trigger."

"Not against Abe Meade. That old man is a ring-tailed wampus cat from Texas. One of the best shots in New Mexico. Come to this country as a prospector. Funny about that. He spent nigh onto five years prospectin' the Old Anchor spread for gold for George Anderson. Got the old man so deep in debt to him that Anderson had to split his place in half and deed the north section to Meade to pay off.

"Now, after he couldn't find gold for Anderson in five years he suddenly strikes gold—after he owns the land. That's why young Johnny Anderson hates him. He thinks Meade swindled his daddy—figgers that gold mine belongs in the Anderson family. Nobody blames him much. Since the spread was divided, Anderson's half has been goin' downhill steady. And now this gold mine business. No wonder John's gone on the prod. I wouldn't like it myself. Would you?"

"Probably not. I take it that Abe Meade is not a popular man."

"Popular? There wouldn't be three mourners if I was to put him in this box tomorrer. When he drives his steers in for shipment he expects cattle cars ahead of everybody else. He wants the best room at the hotel. He

wants a private poker room at Faro Thorpe's place. At the dance palace he wants Belle Howard to entertain only him. He shore is a Texas hellion. Johnny was right when he made up that epitaph. . . Move them sawbucks and that marker so's I can close the door. Yuh can go out the front door. This side entrance is mostly for corpses."

Morgan turned, though, and descended the steps.

"Here's hopin' neither one of us uses it in that fashion, Mr. Snodgrass. So long."

The undertaker's mournful farewell floated after him.

Morgan at last reached the barber shop and was awaiting his turn when he heard a commotion down the street. The man in the chair leaped up and ran to the door with the others to look. He was Sam Trench, the hotel owner.

"What's all the shoutin' about?" called the barber, following.

Morgan ambled toward the door. Men were shouting out in the street, a dog was barking, and people were turning and staring.

Trench jerked the towel from around his neck and tossed it behind him.

"By grabs!" he shouted. "That's down in front of my hotel!"

He dashed out and sprinted down the middle of the dusty street.

"I reckon that makes me next," said Morgan, touching the barber on the shoulder.

"After I see what the ruckus is about," said the barber, and joined the exodus from the shop.

Morgan shrugged, put on his hat, and went out.

Down the street, in front of the hotel, was a freighting wagon. The driver was standing by the wheel talking to a lanky man with sagging vest and sagging sandy mustache. Men were milling around the high-boarded wagon, shouting words that gradually evolved into a sort of chant.

"Abe Meade's dead! Abe Meade's dead!"

CHAPTER III

A Body for the Coffin

BEFORE Morgan could reach the spot, the two men at the wagon finished their palaver. The driver climbed back to his seat while the sagging individual legged it for the bank. The freighter started his team, the crowd falling in alongside and marching with the wagon. Sam Trench walked back beside the front wheel, talking up at the driver.

Morgan recognized Lem Nolan and Joe Blake as the queer procession went past. As he watched the wagon pull up in front of the funeral parlor two men brushed by him. One was the saggy man on whose vest Morgan now caught a glimpse of a badge. The other was a gray-headed man carrying a little black bag. Morgan followed them, and was on his way to the undertaker's house when the law officer stopped all but a few of the crowd and closed the gate.

"Now then," said Henry Maxwell, who had come from his office across the street, "just what happened, Hardwick?"

"It's old man Meade, Mr. Maxwell," explained the driver. "I got his body in the wagon. I found him lyin' in the trail just south of Anderson's place. Gunfight. He was dead, so I brung him to town."

"Back yore wagon up to the side door," ordered the lawman. "Eben, let's get the corpse into yore place."

"I'll help, Mr. Snodgrass," Morgan murmured in the little man's ear. "Mebbe kind of heavy for you."

Snodgrass nodded, and saw the officer looking curiously at his helper.

"Morgan," he said quickly, "this is Matt Quigley, peace marshal of Sand Wells."

"Howdy, Marshal," Morgan said easily.

Quigley grunted something, and they lifted the dead man out of the wagon and carried the body inside to lay it on boards across Snodgrass' sawhorses. The victim wasn't a pretty sight, for he had been shot in the head. The gray-haired man bent over the body.

"Now, let's have your story, Hardwick, while Doc Stamms looks him over," ordered Quigley.

"Well, I was comin' to town with a load from the mines," explained the freighter. "When I rounded that bend where the trail runs between them two low red hills about fifteen mile from here, there he was in the road, dead as a mackerel, his six-shooter by his hand. No hoss, no sound or sight of anybody else. I couldn't leave him layin' there, so I brung him in."

The doctor twisted his head around. "He was killed some time this morning," he said. "Looks like a thirty-thirty hole. He was shot in the side of the head, the bullet ranging upward. The man who shot him must have been on the ground—anyway, below him."

Quigley tugged at his drooping mustache and frowned.

He asked a few questions, but elicited no further information.

Without appearing to do so, Morgan keenly studied the other men. Hardwick, a typical freighting man, had obviously told all he knew. Sam Trench alternately gnawed and blew on his walrus mustache, his sharp eyes darting from one spot to another. Max-

well's red face was inscrutable as he listened.

Finally the peace marshal went over and drew the dead man's gun from its holster where Hardwick had put it. He examined it, calling attention to the fact that three cartridges had been recently fired.

"Reckon that's all there is to it," he concluded. "Abe Meade finally met a man who was faster'n he was. I reckon yuh can get the body ready for burial, Eben."

"How can yuh say that, Marshal?" Morgan suddenly asked grimly. "Didn't yuh hear Dr. Stamms say he was shot with a rifle? What kind of a gun duel is that—a carbine against a six-shooter?"

"Pretty good rifle handlin', I'd call it," said Quigley. "Meade shot three times, didn't he? He wasn't a man to use a six-gun if his target wasn't close enough to hit. He must of wounded the other feller. Hardwick said there was plenty of blood. And Doc Stamms said the rifleman must of been layin' on the ground, the way the bullet ranged up. Plain case of lead poisonin' and no more questions to be asked, the way I see it."

"Folks are pretty anxious hereabouts to bury Abe Meade, ain't they?" remarked Morgan in heavy irony.

"I don't see that it's any of your business, Morgan," Henry Maxwell put in abruptly. "Do you want to make something of this?"

"But aren't yuh goin' to investigate any further, Quigley?" he demanded. "Everywhere I've ever been a man ain't just killed and planted without some sort of inquiry."

QUIGLEY sighed and tugged at his mustache.

"In the first place, Morgan," he explained as though instructing a small boy, "I'm the peace marshal of just Sand Wells. This shootin' took place outside of my jurisdiction. In the second place, all evidence points to a fair fight. In the third place, Abe Meade had a good killin' comin' to him."

"Ain't yuh even goin' to question John Anderson?"

"Why should I?" snapped Quigley.

Helplessly Morgan looked toward the waiting coffin. Snodgrass stared back at him owlishly.

"Besides," Quigley went on patiently, "if the other feller was shot up some we'll soon know who it was, and he can tell his side of the story."

"Which strikes me as plumb sensible," said Sam Trench. "You a lawman, Morgan?"

"No," admitted Morgan truthfully.

"Then what's yore stake in this business?"

Meade looked up, to see a masked man in black in the doorway (CHAPTER X)

Trench demanded.

"None," was Morgan's curt reply.

"Then I think this inquiry can be closed," said Maxwell crisply. "I'll have Hardwick stop by the Old Anchor and notify Meade's crew. Anybody know of any relations Meade had? I don't."

"Not unless Morgan here is his long-lost son come home," sneered Trench.

Morgan looked at the man for a brief moment. He was beginning to dislike the hotel owner.

"Sorry," he said quietly. "I'm not. But I've seen sewed-up poker games before. I hope all you men know what yuh're doin'. Somebody seems to have fixed things all right for you, Maxwell."

Maxwell merely glared at him without speaking.

"Well," said Morgan, "as you gents have been kind enough to point out, this is none of my affair. So I'll be moseyin' along back to the barber shop for my haircut."

"Blazes!" suddenly ejaculated Dr. Stamms.

He was bending closely over the head of the dead man, his fingers maneuvering around the mouth.

"This ain't Abe Meade!" he shouted.

"What?" cried Sam Trench sharply, his face paling.

"Not Abe Meade?" repeated Quigley stupidly. "Looks like him to me."

"Maybe so, but this is not Meade," said the doctor decisively. "I ought to know. Meade has false teeth. This cadaver has natural ones."

Maxwell was jarred out of his calm. He stepped forward and bent over to stare at the corpse.

"This must be Meade!" he clipped out. "If it isn't—who is it?"

"Sometimes a body's hard to identify after death," said the undertaker mournfully, "but I agree with Doc Stamms. This feller was a heap younger'n Abe Meade."

"Ain't anybody ever seen this stranger before?" Marshal Quigley asked plaintively.

The others shook their heads. Morgan noted that Sam Trench looked positively ill. He was sure the hotel keeper was holding back something, but Trench did not break his silence.

"Why not search the body, Marshal?" suggested Morgan dryly. "Yuh might find somethin'."

Quigley sheepishly began emptying the dead man's pockets. Morgan studied the body carefully.

The dead man had possibly been in his late forties. His hair was gray at the temples, his face craggy, his mouth wide and humorous. He wore an ordinary black suit and fairly new cowboy boots. Everything about him showed signs of wear except the boots.

As Morgan's gaze reached the dusty boots his eyes narrowed suddenly. The entire heel of the left boot was missing. Somewhere, somehow, the dead man had recently lost his heel. The exposed leather was not the slightest bit soiled.

Quigley's search brought a meager handful of possessions into view. There was a suspender button, pocket-knife, half a plug of chewing tobacco, and a buckskin money pouch. The money pouch yielded less than ten dollars in cash and a folded envelope.

"Traveled light," observed Snodgrass critically. "This here won't pay for buryin' him."

MARSHAL Quigley unfolded the envelope. It was the cover of a canceled letter, the postmark torn away with the stamp. It was addressed to Stanley Burke at Shrevesport, Louisiana. There was nothing inside.

"Looks like his name might of been Stanley Burke," announced Quigley.

"Stanley Burke!" came a choking cry from Sam Trench. He looked around nervously as everybody eyed him. "I reckon this must be Burke all right," he went on. "I didn't recognize him."

"Who is Burke?" demanded Maxwell tersely.

Trench smiled in sickly fashion. "Just a pilgrim who come in by train yesterday. He put up at the hotel with his sick wife and his daughter. The womenfolks are at the hotel now. The gal's a right pretty little thing named Sally."

"Let me see that envelope," said Maxwell.

He took it from the marshal's hand, and studied the scrawled superscription. Morgan drew near to look over his shoulder.

"There's something penciled on the back," observed Morgan.

Maxwell whipped the envelope over and turned it to reveal written in a neat, firm hand a name and address.

" 'Abe Meade,' " he read aloud, " 'nineteen miles north Sand Wells, New Mexico.' " He glanced up. "This man evidently was on his way to see Meade. That old hellion may be cooking up another trick of some kind. He could have killed this man himself."

"No matter who did it, I've still got to bury the corpse," Snodgrass said sadly. "And where's the money comin' from, unless his widow has it?"

"Mebbe she has," said Quigley. He tugged at his mustache and scowled. "You just hold up, Eben, while I go to the hotel with Sam and get the gal to come see if this is her pa."

"There's nothing more we can do here," said Maxwell, handing the envelope back to the marshal. "Come on, Hardwick."

The men filed through the side entrance

to the yard, leaving Morgan and the sad-faced undertaker alone. Morgan quietly took off his coat and started rolling up his sleeves.

"I guess we'd better tidy up the dead man some before a woman has to see him."

"That's right," agreed Snodgrass. "But I'm not hirin' yuh, young feller."

"No," Morgan said soberly. "No, yuh're not. But I've got a feelin' a job is shapin' up for me in Sand Wells, after all."

CHAPTER IV

A Job for Morgan

THE girl was a pretty little thing as she came scurrying down the street, her head bobbing along just at the shoulder of the lanky peace marshal. Wayne Morgan stood inside the front doorway of the funeral parlor and studied her as she approached.

She couldn't have been more than twenty at most, with lovely brown hair over which she had thrown a light shawl, big black eyes, and pale features. She wore a plaid silk dress with leg-o'-mutton sleeves and full skirt that accentuated the slimness of her waist. Morgan reckoned that she wouldn't have weighed a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet.

He knew before she arrived that this girl was the daughter of the dead man. She had the same wide, humorous mouth, the same type of craggy features in a feminine way. But now her face was pale and strained, and she hurried along in nervous anxiety which made Morgan think of a delicate sumac leaf blowing before an early fall breeze.

Sally Burke was definitely not a child of the Frontier. Women like this, reflected Morgan, had no business in pioneer country. They weren't fitted for such a hard life. But they always came—and most of them survived courageously. Nevertheless, his heart swelled with pity for this girl when Marshal Quigley ushered her into the mortuary.

"Miss Burke, this here is a hairpin name of Morgan," informed Quigley.

Morgan swept off his sombrero and bowed.

"Is he—" faltered the girl, looking appealingly at Morgan.

"Nope," supplied Quigley. "Company freighter name of Hardwick brought the body in." And then, as Morgan looked questioningly beyond for the missing hotel owner, he added, "Trench'll be along directly. Went over to Kilgore's livery stable first. Yonder's Eben Snodgrass, the undertaker, miss."

The girl turned uncertainly toward the sad-faced Snodgrass. She glanced around the front room of the funeral parlor apprehensively.

"Howdy, miss," the fat little man greeted mournfully. "I reckon Marshal Quigley's told yuh what we have to ask yuh to do. If yuh're ready, just follow me. There's nothin' to be afraid of, and mebbe it ain't yore pa anyhow."

Snodgrass and Quigley herded the girl on to the rear, and Morgan followed silently. He watched the girl's straight back and observed how her slender fingers kept gripping and relaxing at her sides.

"Game little thoroughbred," he thought.

Snodgrass led the girl to the side where the ugly bullet wound did not show and turned back the sheet which was now draped over the body on the trestle.

Sally Burke stood there without moving, as though she had turned into a statue. Only her eyes lived, burning like two great dark coals in her ashen face as she gazed down on the dead man. Her nervous fingers had stilled. She did not cry out. She just looked for a long moment.

"Daddy!" she whispered then. "Oh, Daddy!"

Without warning she became unhinged at the knees. She would have fallen to the floor had not Morgan leaped forward and caught her. He held her against his broad chest like a wilted little flower, and his eyes grew moist as he gazed down at her slender white throat where no pulse was perceptible. He noticed now, too, how threadbare was the taffeta silk dress she wore.

He nodded at Snodgrass to recover the corpse, and he turned to carry the girl back to the front room.

"Guess I'd better go get Doc Stamms again, huh?" asked Quigley doubtfully.

"No," said Morgan. "Just get some cold water."

"I got a bottle of whisky," offered Snodgrass in his sad monotone. "Use it to keep off mosquitoes."

"Haw!" exploded Quigley. "There ain't a mosquito within a hundred miles of Sand Wells, Eben, and you know it."

"Just get some cold water," ordered Morgan crisply.

He lay the unconscious girl on a worn leather davenport, sat down on the edge of the couch, and began chafing the girl's cold hands. Snodgrass trotted in with a pitcher of water and began sprinkling it on her face.

IN A minute the girl stirred slightly, moaned, and opened her eyes. She stared up wildly and would have struggled to her feet but her gaze fell on Morgan's solicitous face, and she quieted magically. There was something magnetic about this big stranger that soothed and reassured her.

"My father!" she murmured. "Yes, that was my father. Oh, my poor mother! This will kill her." She began sobbing softly.

"There, there!" said Morgan gently, helping her to sit up.

"Miss Burke," said Marshal Quigley, "if yuh're able, I want to ask yuh some questions. What was yore pa doin' out on the north trail?"

"North trail?" she echoed blankly. "I don't know. I—I don't understand."

"He was found about fifteen miles north of town on the road to Dutchman's Desert," explained Morgan gently. "Do yuh know why he was goin' into that part of the country?"

"No. No, I don't."

"Yuh must know somethin'," said Quigley, his tone growing impatient. "Yuh knew yore dad wasn't at the hotel, didn't yuh?"

"Oh, yes. He left early this morning. He—he told us to stay at the hotel and—and not worry. He said he had some business to tend to and that he would be back tonight. He didn't tell me where he was going. He may have told Mother. Please tell me how it happened."

"We don't know much about it," said Quigley, after he had given her a brief account. "Did yore pa have any money on him?"

"All we had in the world," Sally said faintly.

"How much?" demanded Quigley bluntly.

"I—don't know. He wore it in a money-belt around his waist. We—aren't very rich."

The three men glanced at each other. There had been no money-belt on the dead man.

"There was only nine dollars and thirty-five cents in a coin pouch in his pants pocket," volunteered Snodgrass. "I'm holdin' it with his gun and other effects. Nothin' much else. His clothes didn't look like he'd been robbed."

"My father wore a snake-skin money-belt under his clothes," Sally Burke said positively. "I don't know how much he had in it, but he had it."

"Mebbe yore ma knows what he had and where he was goin'," commented Marshal Quigley. "Reckon I'll have to ask her."

"Oh, no, please don't!" protested the girl quickly. "I'll ask her. I must break the news to her myself. Oh, I don't know what we are going to do!"

"Take it easy, Miss Sally," soothed Morgan. "We'll figger things out somehow."

"But we didn't have much money," protested Sally. "Now we haven't any—and we're strangers in a strange land."

The entrance of Sam Trench furnished an interruption. The hotel man came forward, removing his hat and mopping his brow.

"Reckon that was Burke all right," he said. "Kilgore told me he rented a hoss about six o'clock this mornin' to ride up to the Old Anchor. Put up a twenty-dollar deposit on the nag. The hoss hasn't come in yet. Likely strayin' somewheres south of the PDQ."

"Twenty dollars'll help some," said Snodgrass. "Yuh'll get that back, Miss Burke, when Kilgore's animal comes back."

"You folks hard up?" Trench asked the girl. "I'm mighty sorry, Miss Sally. What yuh goin' to do?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Sally.

"You and yore ma are welcome to stay the week out at the hotel with no cost," offered Trench heartily. "And I reckon we can take up a collection."

"No, no!" exclaimed the girl quickly. Flushing, she drew herself proudly erect. "You gentlemen are kind, but we cannot accept charity. This is all so horrible and so sudden, but—but—"

"Wait right here," said Snodgrass. Grabbing his plug hat from a wall rack he set it on his bald head. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Just what yuh goin' to do about the killin' itself, Quigley?" Morgan asked the marshal bluntly.

Quigley shot him a cagey glance, then looked aside as he tugged at his mustache.

"Danged if you ain't a pest, Morgan," he mumbled, lowering his voice so the girl couldn't hear. "I told you I'm only the town marshal. The fact that the dead man ain't who we thought don't change the way he died none."

"Then yuh don't intend to do anything about it?" Morgan asked flatly.

"I'll do everything I can do," Quigley declared angrily, "but I ain't goin' to act like a Territorial marshal, if that's what yuh mean. And yuh better keep yore bill out of things if yuh want to stay healthy. You don't understand things around here."

"No, I don't," admitted Morgan frankly. "But I'm beginnin' to."

TRENCH, talking with Sally Burke, kept darting glances at Morgan's broad back. He turned abruptly from the girl and spoke to the dark-haired cowboy.

"From what I've seen of yuh, Morgan," he said in an ugly tone, "yuh're a trouble-maker. Take my advice and keep yore nose clean. We can handle things here in Sand Wells without yore help. If yuh're smart, yuh'll fork yore bronc and get along with yore driftin'."

"Thanks," Morgan drawled coolly. "And from what I've seen of you, Trench, I . . . No, I won't say it, since yuh've made a kindly offer to Miss Burke."

"Say anything yuh're man enough to say," Trench invited curtly. "Start anything yuh think yuh're big enough to finish."

"And have Marshal Quigley take a hand—

since this is in his territory, eh?" Morgan said quietly.

Ebenezer Snodgrass returned at that moment, trotted into the house with a woman in tow. Trench retreated a pace as he recognized her. Morgan surveyed her curiously.

"This is the gal, Belle," Snodgrass said to her. "Sally, let me make yuh acquainted with Belle Howard, one of the finest women ever to walk the streets of Sand Wells."

Belle Howard went swiftly to the grief-stricken and perplexed girl and put her arm around her shoulders.

"My dear child," she said in a husky contralto voice, "I'm terribly sorry to hear of your trouble. You and your mother are going to move in with me at once."

Sally Burke stiffened in protest. "Oh, we couldn't! Thank you a lot for your kindness, Mrs. Howard, but we—we just can't accept charity."

"Miss Howard," corrected Belle. "And not another word, my dear. I won't hear of any other arrangement. And it isn't charity. We'll work out something. Can you sing? Or dance?"

"Why, I sing a little—and play the piano," Sally answered, slowly responding to the woman's kindliness. "But I don't understand—"

"Belle runs the Palace Dance Hall," explained Snodgrass.

"And I can certainly use a good musician and singer," added Belle emphatically. "Come along with me, dearie, and we'll talk things over to your entire satisfaction."

Sally smiled slightly for the first time. It was an expression that lighted up her face like a lamp behind a delicately tinted window.

"Oh, if I can work for what we get, that's different!" she cried. "At least Mother and I can stay here until we get enough to go back to Louisiana."

Morgan thought of objecting but, eyeing Belle Howard keenly, he decided to remain silent. Somebody had to take care of this proud little orphan and her invalid mother. Why not Belle Howard?

Belle was a pretty brunette in her thirties, plump but comely. Her beauty was shadowed by a certain hardness of eye and voice, and a rather firm expression around her generous mouth. Morgan had known dozens of women like Belle Howard, typical daughters of Frontier entertainment. Most of them proved to have hearts of gold beneath their tough exterior. Anyway, this was a temporary solution.

Sally looked at Morgan, a question in her large dark eyes.

"Why not go with Miss Howard, Sally?" he said, smiling encouragement. "I think you and your mother will be in fine hands."

Belle Howard tilted her head and surveyed Morgan coolly. She liked what she saw.

"You're not so bad-looking yourself, cowboy," she said in her throaty voice. "Come over to the Palace. I'll give you a dance any time." She turned back to Sally. "Come on, honey, let's get out of here. This is an awful place to bring a young girl. Quigley, you ought to have had more sense."

Even as Belle ushered Sally away, the girl laid a hand on the arms of Morgan and Trench.

"Oh, thank you both for being so kind to me," she said sincerely. "And please don't fight. Thank all of you." She included Snodgrass and Quigley in her glance. "I know you'll do everything you can to help."

"Humph!" snorted Belle Howard expressively, dragging Sally away like a Brahma bull trailing a lariat.

In the silence that followed their departure Snodgrass turned his owlish gaze upon Marshal Quigley.

"What am I goin' to do with Burke's body, at that, Matt?" he asked.

"Get it ready for burial tomorrow," advised Quigley. "If nothin' else happens, the town'll have to pay for it." [*Turn page*]

"Morgan might go out and dig the grave in Boot Hill," sneered Trench. "He's so danged anxious to help."

Morgan put on his hat and adjusted it carefully as he eyed each of the men in the room in turn. Then he strolled to the door. On the threshold he paused and glanced back.

"Yuh know," he said softly, "I might do just that."

And he stepped out into the sunshine.

CHAPTER V

Guntrap Trail

PERHAPS a couple of miles northeast of town in a small box canyon lost in a maze of rolling foothills a man had made a dry camp with a little band of three horses. He was an arresting figure as he squatted there checking over and rearranging the packs from the backs of two of the horses.

He was an Indian, a brawny and muscular Yaqui, brown as the hills which surrounded him, clad in white drill breeches and white cotton shirt. Soft and pliable beaded moccasins were on his feet, and a red bandeau was around his head, binding down his black locks. He wore a wicked-looking hunting knife in a sheath at his waist, and a well-oiled Winchester rifle was within easy reach of his hand.

Two of the horses, a pinto and a gray, were hobbled to prevent their straying. The third horse, a magnificent coal-black stallion, was as free as the air, but he did not wander off. Almost as much as the Indian he seemed to be alert and on guard, his ears constantly pricking forward and his great dark eyes intelligently surveying everything around him. When a paper blew away from the packs and fluttered past him in the slight breeze that sighed through the canyon he whickered softly.

The Indian looked up with a smile.

"Ho, Midnight," he said in a deep, pleasant voice, "you, too, look for Senor, no?"

The great horse snorted, and again whinnied gently.

"Have patience, black one. He will be here soon."

The Indian glanced up at the early afternoon sun, then resumed his preparations for the night's meal.

Suddenly he paused and cocked his head to listen. His keen ears had caught the faint sound of a horse's hoof, down the canyon, a sound that no white man could have heard at that distance. Grasping his rifle, he rose to his feet and took shelter behind a huge boulder.

At that moment the cry of a mountain lion came echoing up the canyon. Instantly the Indian relaxed. He answered with a like call. In a short while Wayne Morgan came riding along the canyon into view.

"Senor!" cried the Indian, his eyes lighting up as they always did upon the return of his friend. "Senor" was the only name ever given by the Yaqui to this tall trail companion of his.

Midnight whinnied loudly and came trotting forward.

"How, Blue Hawk!" greeted Morgan. He swung lithely down from his roan and strode forward, leading his mount by the reins. "And Midnight! What yuh say, big feller?"

The great horse stepped daintily forward and nuzzled at Morgan's shoulder. Laughingly Morgan patted the glossy neck, then reached into his pocket for the lump of sugar the black horse knew was there.

"Senor, I have made camp here as you directed," said Blue Hawk, as he stripped the saddle from the sweating roan. "But you did not get the supplies. You did not get haircut!"

"No, Hawk," Morgan told him soberly. "Instead, I ran into what looks like a peck of trouble for a pair of helpless women."

"Tell me, Senor," breathed the Indian.

Morgan gave a brief but graphic account of his experiences in Sand Wells. When he had finished Blue Hawk nodded sagely.

"Then you think, Senor, this is job for Masked Rider?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it is, Hawk."

"Good," Blue Hawk grunted. "What we do first?"

Morgan glanced at the sun, pleased to find it still high.

"The first thing to do is to visit the spot where Hardwick found Burke's body," he decided. "I'm right curious to read sign there."

"Fine," said the Indian. "I saddle Midnight and Gray Boy pronto. You will eat something, Senor?"

"No," said Morgan. "I think I'll be eatin' supper with an old hellion named Abe Meade."

Blue Hawk swiftly saddled the two horses. Then Morgan prepared to change his identity from that of the drifting cowboy he had been in Sand Wells to that of the Masked Rider. From the saddle-roll on the black stallion's saddle he drew forth a crushed black sombrero which he cuffed back into shape and put on, discarding the gray Stetson he had been wearing. Then he shook out a somber black cloak and fastened it around his shoulders.

A black domino completed his attire—and Wayne Morgan, cowboy, had disappeared. In his place stood the Masked Rider, the

Robin Hood outlaw who had a price on his head, but a man feared above all others by criminals of the West—and blessed by those he aided.

IN A short time Blue Hawk also was ready to ride, and the sun was still only barely beginning its path down the sky as they set out for a long trek across the rangeland. They were headed on a new justice trail, and neither of them would rest from now on until their purpose was accomplished.

Less than three hours after riding away from their canyon hide-out the two men reached the place where Stanley Burke's body had been found. The Masked Rider located it easily from Hardwick's description, for he had given the freighter a chance to go into greater details than Marshal Quigley had given the man. The Masked Rider judged the scene of death to be well within John Anderson's PDQ range.

Dismounting and leaving their steeds ground-hitched, the two men methodically went to work quartering the area. Both of them could track and read sign with the keenness of Blue Hawk's ancestors, and they rarely missed a trick.

In silence they studied the ground, not making any comparisons until they had both read all sign visible to them. Then, while Blue Hawk circled slowly around like a bloodhound seeking a scent, the Masked Rider approached the spot in the trail where the dried life blood of Burke was still visible. Here he stood, slowly turning around while his dark blue eyes searched every inch of the dusty road within ten yards.

Suddenly he expelled a quick breath of triumph, walked southward a couple of strides and retrieved something from a dusty rut. He examined his find carefully while he waited for his companion to finish his sign hunt. The sun, lowering redly in the west now, was still above the horizon when the Indian approached and signified that he was ready to report.

"All right, Hawk," said the Masked Rider, in the stern and somewhat harsh tones he used when playing the rôle of the Robin Hood outlaw—even when alone with the Yaqui. "Tell me what yuh've read."

"Yes, Senor," the Indian said gravely. He pointed out what he had seen and been impressed by as he talked. "Only one man was shot here. There is mark where Burke, riding north, halted his horse and dismounted. He was shot and fell on trail where this blood spot shows. Sliding mark shows that one foot slipped from under him. Over in thicket to left is evidence that man with rifle was hiding, but I did not find rifle shell."

"Whoever did this job, Hawk," the masked man said grimly, "was a pretty cagey feller. Go on."

"Then rifleman came out of thicket and walked to this spot. He wore cowboy boots. He stood here and looked down, maybe to make sure victim was dead. I cannot see just how Burke was killed. Yonder toward north is spot where freighter stopped his wagon, got down and came to examine body. One dragging heel mark shows where he lugged body back to wagon. I cannot read more, as there are marks of many wagons and horses. Can you read what Blue Hawk has missed, Senor?"

"I think so, Hawk," said the Masked Rider grimly. "See this?" He extended the object he had picked up.

Blue Hawk nodded as he gazed at what the masked man held in his hand. It was the heel from a man's fairly new boot, shorn clean away. Almost buried in the hard leather was a six-shooter slug.

"Whoever it was that caused Burke to stop and dismount must have been the man who shot his heel away," the black-clad man explained. "There were two killers. The first met Burke face to face and attracted his attention. They exchanged shots. The first killer missed Burke in any vital spot, but shot him in the heel and knocked him down. Then it was that the rifleman hidin' in the thicket came out and stood above the victim. In cold blood he pointed his rifle and shot Burke in the temple.

"Quigley and Dr. Stamms had it all wrong. It was the killer who stood above his victim, instead of bein' on the ground and shootin' up at Burke. That is why the bullet seemed to range upward. It actually ranged downward. Hawk, them two killers guntrapped Stanley Burke and murdered him on his trail this mornin'. One of 'em wore cowboy boots and carried a rifle. The other, whose marks are all mixed up with others now in the trail, came down the road southward and is a bad marksman with a six-shooter."

"Yes, that is it," agreed the Indian. Mentally he reconstructed the scene as the Masked Rider had described it. "He knocked Burke down, this bad marksman, and his rifle pardner killed him."

"There is one more angle to this," reflected the Masked Rider thoughtfully. "It's possible that the killer with the six-gun shot so bad because he was too far away. And the other killer may have shot Burke from the thicket before comin' out of it."

BLUE HAWK nodded thoughtfully. "That is true. But why do you think that, Senor?"

"Because there is no reason for anybody hereabouts to kill Burke, a stranger. At a distance they must have mistaken him for Abraham Meade. And from what I gathered

about Meade, no killer would have wanted to risk gettin' too close to him before shootin'."

"So this Burke was killed by mistake?"

"Not only was he killed by mistake, Hawk. He was guntrapped and murdered."

"Ugh! Bad medicine. You think the dry-gulchers found out their mistake, Senor?"

"Mebbe not. Hardwick, the freighter, didn't know any better. He thought the dead man was Abe Meade. Anyway, everybody will know soon enough that a mistake was made. Meanwhile, two women have lost husband and father and been left helpless and broke in Sand Wells. And Marshal Quigley intends to do nothin' about it."

"So the Masked Rider will take a hand in game," said Blue Hawk confidently, and asked his usual question: "What do we do, Senor?"

"I want yuh to ride on to Meade's place and scout the situation there. Get a job of some kind if yuh can and wait for word from me."

"Very well, Senor. What will you do?"

"I'll go back by the hide-out and swap horses. Wayne Morgan will go back to town. Henry Maxwell offered me a job this mornin'. I am goin' to take it."

"He wanted you to kill Abraham Meade for him?"

"Yes," the Masked Rider said in cold, hard tones. "And that job is still open since two killers made a mistake here this mornin'. I wasn't so curious before, but now I'm beginnin' to want to know just how bad Meade deserves killing."

"You think maybe killers work for Maxwell?"

"I don't know. If so, why would Maxwell try to hire me for the job if he had a guntrap already set, and hadn't yet learned that it had failed?"

"On other hand, Anderson might be one of killers," suggested Blue Hawk.

"We won't overlook John Anderson," promised the Masked Rider grimly. "Whoever it was is goin' to pay for murderin' the wrong man. Let's get goin', Hawk."

"Adios, Senor," said the Indian, as he swung into saddle.

"Hasta manana," returned the Masked Rider.

Stepping into his own saddle he headed the huge black stallion southward.

That simply they parted, each going to do his appointed task, making no complicated plans which might go awry, but falling in with things as they found them and letting events shape their future actions.

But the very wind seemed to whistle a more cheerful tune, and a field lark took off from the cedar thicket and soared up into the blue as he piped a joyous note. The entire range seemed to gather itself and crouch in breathless expectancy as the black-clad figure on the great black horse thundered across the prairie into the creeping nightfall, an ominous figure of doom riding the guntrap trail.

CHAPTER VI

The Palace

OUTSIDE of the hotel, the Palace Dance Hall was the most pretentious building in Sand Wells. It was even larger than the two-storied bank building. Built by the enterprising "Faro" Thorpe, the dance hall was a two-storied building which housed a saloon and gambling joint on one side and a huge dance floor on the other.

The two establishments were connected by a wide archway in the middle of the bisecting wall. Upstairs were rooms and living quarters for the dance hall girls and other employees. Belle Howard, queen of the roost, lived in three rooms there.

Cheap and somewhat tawdry, the place was clean and decent, for Belle Howard tolerated no monkey business. Any dance hall girl who couldn't behave herself had to move out. No matter what gambling, drinking or brawling took place on the ground floor, nothing questionable ever intruded above stairs. No drinking in the rooms, no men visitors, no gambling, no rough-house.

Whether or not Faro Thorpe wholly concurred in this straight-laced arrangement, he abided by it. He had hired Belle Howard to run the dance hall, and he had to accept her on her own terms. It had proved a paying proposition.

He stood now in the archway between saloon and dance hall, immaculate in his Prince Albert and carefully creased trousers of black broadcloth, his creamy waistcoat of tiny-flowered satin and his black silk bow tie, and surveyed the night crowd in both places. Pay-day at the mines always stimulated the entertainment business.

Thorpe was a well-built man of medium height, and in his late thirties. His coloring was as fair as that of a Norseman, his hair a shining blond, and his eyes as blue as a mountain tarn. He was clean-shaven, quiet of manner and with a soft, pleasant and persuasive voice. Fairly well educated, he had come to this part of the country from San Francisco about the time that George Anderson had died a couple of years before. He had opened his house of entertainment and had started buying property about town.

Easily the most influential citizen of Sand

Wells now, he was by no means a timid or fearful man. In a pair of spring-clip shoulder holsters beneath his smoothly tailored Prince Albert he wore a pair of nickel-plated, pearl-handled .38 six-shooters which he knew how to use. And although he rarely went in for physical violence, if occasion required, he could fight like a jungle cat and with the proficiency of a lumberjack. He hadn't spent half his life on the Barbary Coast for nothing.

There was one fly in his ointment. Ever a self-controlled, quiet, shrewdly calculating man who planned and executed his schemes without fuss or feathers, he had begun making plans for the future which included Belle Howard, his business partner. But he had neglected to let Belle in on the fact that he was falling in love with her, and of late had noted with growing disapproval that Henry Maxwell, resident manager of the borax mines from which he derived a large part of his income, was becoming too interested in the lady.

He watched now, without seeming to do so, as Maxwell danced with Belle while a pianist played a Viennese waltz. Most of the other dancers had drifted to the sides of the huge floor and were also watching the performing couple. The fiddler and the regular piano player sat idly on the little platform at the end of the hall while a new pianist played this music so rare in a place of this sort.

Maxwell was a good waltzer, Thorpe had to admit. But he didn't like it. His face calm and inscrutable, the gambler drew a slim cigar from his breast pocket and carefully lighted it. He glanced through the delicate smoke fog he created toward the musicians' platform and studied the slender back of the dark-haired girl who was playing.

She finished the waltz and dropped her hands. Thorpe caught Belle Howard's eye and jerked his head imperceptibly. Belle smiled at her partner and led him toward the archway.

"Hello, Thorpe," greeted Maxwell.

"Good evening, Mr. Maxwell," replied Thorpe evenly. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Very much, thanks to Miss Howard. Join me in a drink?"

"No, thanks. I want to speak to Belle a moment."

Maxwell thanked Belle for the dance and went on into the barroom.

Belle halted beside Thorpe and looked at him levelly.

"That girl at the piano," Thorpe answered her unspoken question. "Who is she? I never saw her before."

"She's the daughter of the man who was killed out on the mine trail this morning. Her name is Sally Burke. I gave her a job."

FARO THORPE raised his eyebrows slightly and flicked a glance at the girl, then brought his blue eyes back to Belle.

"Oh, yes, I heard about that stranger. I didn't know he even had a family. And you've got her playing the piano here—with her father not yet buried?"

"Don't act so shocked, Faro. I know you well enough to know that nothing shocks you. The girl is just playing a little while to get accustomed to the place. It's good for her. She and her mother are living at the hotel. They are moving in with me tomorrow."

Thorpe frowned. "Moving in with you?"

"Have you any objections?"

He shrugged. "None at all, my dear," he said smoothly. "But aren't you being a little too generous?"

Belle surveyed him coolly. She knew what he meant. It did seem incongruous. Here she was, a dance hall mistress in her gawdy decolleté black and gold dress and her war paint, playing hostess to a pair of women from a refined home.

"The devil with you!" she said flatly. "It's little you know about the heart of a woman."

"I may know more than you reckon for," he returned in a quiet voice. "If it's money the girl needs to take her back home, give it to her and charge it up to house expense. She's not the type to mix here."

"She has pride, Faro. She won't accept anything. But you're a gentleman for offering it, and I'll tell her."

"Tell her what you please," replied Thorpe, shrugging, "but you remember yourself that I'm a gentleman."

Before Belle had time to react to this unusual remark a footfall sounded behind them and a man's voice said:

"Hello there, Belle. How's my best gal? Howdy, Thorpe. How about a little game?"

A tall and sinewy young man in rangeland garb had stopped beside them, a red-headed fellow with greenish-blue eyes. His face was tanned and had sun wrinkles, but it was a pleasant enough except for a willful expression around the mouth and a slightly petulant pout to the thin lips.

"Hello, Anderson," Thorpe said smiling. "I guess a little session can be arranged, but hadn't you better go slow on your gambling?"

"I want some revenge," declared Anderson, half in jest and half in earnest.

"Later then, if you insist," agreed Thorpe.

"A fine beau, you are, John Anderson," chided Belle Howard. "Talking about best girls and cards in the same breath."

"Aw, now, Belle," protested Anderson, "you know I'm just makin' talk with Thorpe. Yuh're the one I rode in to see. How about a dance?" He drew her out onto the floor. "Say! Who's your new piano player?"

"Come and meet her," suggested Belle. "You ought to be interested. She's the daughter of a man who got killed today by mistake—mistaken for Abe Meade."

Both Belle and Thorpe watched Anderson's face keenly. Anderson's eyes went wide, and he scowled at mention of Meade's name.

"Don't reckon I've heard about that," he said thinly.

Thorpe glanced toward the front of the saloon, and his eyes narrowed slightly at sight of the man who had just entered through the batwings in company with Peace Marshal Quigley. The stranger stopped at the bar beside Maxwell, joining the mine manager in a drink, while Quigley walked over to the trio in the archway.

"Howdy," he greeted dryly. "Didn't I hear somethin' said about the Burke killin'? I don't reckon yuh know anything about it, do yuh, Anderson?"

"I don't reckon I'd tell yuh if I did," the PDQ rancher said coldly.

"Nope," agreed the peace officer. "But it happened on your range. No harm in askin'."

"Who's your friend, Quigley?" asked Thorpe, flicking a glance toward the two men at the bar.

"Him?" said the lawman. "With Maxwell? Name's Morgan. Stranger who blew in this mornin'. Nosey sort of cuss. Been proddin' me about makin' an investigation of that killin'. I thought he'd left town till I met him outside a minute ago."

Anderson and Thorpe looked sharply at Morgan's back, their eyes speculative.

"Is that so?" murmured the gambler.

"Inquisitive sort of jigger, huh?" commented Anderson.

"Shore is," said Quigley. "I thought him and Sam Trench would come to blows a couple times."

"You vultures stop picking that cowboy to pieces," said Belle Howard peremptorily. "He looks pretty good to me. . . . Come on, John—I'll introduce you to Sally Burke."

THEY made their way across the dance floor and toward the platform where the two regular musicians were making ready to resume playing cowboy and Frontier tunes. Quigley wandered off, and Thorpe moved leisurely to the bar where he joined Maxwell and Morgan.

Morgan had just set down his empty whisky glass and was speaking.

"Yuh told me to hunt yuh up if I changed my mind about that job, Maxwell," he said casually. "I've been thinkin' your proposition over since mornin'."

"Oh, that," replied Maxwell, with a careless shrug. "As one gent to another, I'll ask you to forget what was said, Morgan."

Morgan was faintly surprised. "Yuh mean yuh don't want to hire me, after all?"

Maxwell looked at him squarely. "Frankly, I don't," he said.

"But that problem yuh told me yuh had," pointed out Morgan. "It still ain't solved."

"You're not the man for it," replied Maxwell. "I've changed my mind. . . . Oh, hello, Thorpe."

"Hello," said Thorpe to Maxwell, his keen blue eyes on Morgan. "Let's have a drink on the house. What'll it be, stranger?"

"Two fingers of rye," said Morgan, accepting.

"Meet Morgan," said Maxwell. "Morgan, this is Faro Thorpe, owner of this palace of sin."

"Glad to know you, Morgan," said Thorpe. "I've heard of you."

Morgan did not trouble to reply that he had also heard of Faro Thorpe.

"Nice place yuh've got here," was all he said.

The bartender set out a whisky bottle, and all three drank.

"Staying in town long?" asked Thorpe, as he set down his glass.

"Don't reckon so, now," answered Morgan, with a glance at Maxwell.

"Well, make yourself at home here," Thorpe invited pleasantly. "Ladies in the dance hall, drinks here—and if you play cards, you'll find some amusement in the back room."

"Thanks," said Morgan.

The two men left him, talking together as they strolled away. Morgan gazed after them and shrugged lightly. So Maxwell had grown leery of him and had shut the job door right in his face. Which simply meant that he would have to employ other ways of checking up on the mining company.

CHAPTER VII

Knife Introduction

AFTER a few dance tunes there was a brief pause in the other room, and then the soft strains of a piano came floating through the archway. It was an old ballad, a favorite of Wayne Morgan's and he made his way to the dance hall to listen to it. As he entered, a sweet, girlish voice was lifted in song.

Oh, believe me, if all those endearing young charms
That I gaze on so fondly today. . . .

Morgan walked toward the platform where Sally Burke was playing and singing while John Anderson leaned on the piano, watching and listening.

"Who's the red-headed cowboy?" Morgan asked Belle Howard as he passed her.

"John Anderson," said Belle. "Don't worry, Morgan. I wouldn't introduce anybody to that girl who isn't fit to talk to her."

"Anderson's the feller who goes gunnin' for Abe Meade when he gets full of red-eye, ain't he?"

Belle Howard gave him a stabbing glance. "You're a curious somebody, Morgan. Better not start probing into Anderson's habits. He hates the very ground Abe Meade walks on."

"I thought he loved the ground and it was just Meade he hated," commented Morgan.

Belle caught her breath, her eyes sparkling in appreciation.

"Somewhat of a wit, too, aren't you?"

"In a sort of half way," Morgan drawled. "But thanks for the advice. Won't cause any fireworks if I just sort of sidle up and meet him, will it?"

Belle laughed. "Come on," she said, giving in.

Just as they reached the platform Sally Burke's hands made a discord, and her voice broke.

Thou wouldst still be adored, as this moment. . .

She bowed her head against the music rest and began sobbing uncontrollably.

Swiftly Morgan sprang upon the platform and bent over the girl, his broad back to the rear door. So he failed to see that door open stealthily and two men barely cross the threshold. Their neckerchiefs were pulled up high about their mouths, and their hats were pulled low. In the shadows there they were unrecognizable. But the six-shooter in the hand of one and the glittering knife held by its tip in the right hand of the other were definitely not anonymous.

Just as Morgan spoke comfortingly to the sobbing girl, the man with the knife drew back his arm and snapped it forward in a dexterous motion. Like a beam of light the weapon flashed across the end of the room, aimed unerringly at the center of Morgan's back. Belle Howard uttered a helpless little cry of warning.

But it was John Anderson who sprang to life. Snatching up the first thing that came to hand, he lunged forward and interposed it between Morgan's shoulders and the flying knife. With a thud and splintering sound the weapon crashed into the fiddler's instrument, arrested in its flight just an inch from the intended victim's body.

Even before the uproar of shouts and cries, Morgan was in action. He whirled about in a crouch, his two guns appearing like magic in his hands. He snapped a pair of shots at the gaping back door just as the two assassins rushed out into the night. Then, and then only, he paused to look at the shattered violin with its captured knife in the red-headed rancher's hand.

"Thanks, friend," he said to Anderson. "That's one I owe yuh. And I always pay my debts. Did yuh see who it was?"

"Only that there was two of 'em," answered Anderson. He wrenched the knife from the ruined violin and handed the instrument to its owner. "Huumm—this is a mule skinner's knife."

"Hold onto it, "said Morgan. Then, to the spluttering fiddler: "I'll buy yuh a new fiddle, feller. I'll be back."

He started for the back doorway at a run.

"Hey, wait, yuh crazy fool!" yelled Anderson. "I'll go with you."

Belle Howard's arms went around the trembling Sally as both stared after the two men.

"I don't reckon that pair of gents need a better introduction to each other," Belle commented.

By the time Morgan and Anderson reached the alley behind the dance hall it was deserted. The two would-be assassins had completely disappeared. There was no sound of galloping hoofs, so it was obvious that the murderous pair had simply pulled down their neckerchiefs and mingled with the people on the streets.

THEY could have entered any place and lost themselves easily. They could have circled the Palace and come right back in through the front, with nobody the wiser.

"You go one way, pard, and I'll go the other," suggested Anderson. "We'll meet in front."

"No use, Anderson," said Morgan. "We'd never find 'em now."

"Mebbe yuh shot one of 'em."

"I'm afraid not. We might as well go back to the dance hall."

"All right," agreed Anderson. "Yuh take it cool enough. Yuh ought to know who's gunnin' for yuh. Ain't yuh got no idea?"

"Just an idea," admitted Morgan, saying no more.

An idea was all it was. The first logical suspect Morgan could think of was Henry Maxwell. Maxwell had talked too much before making sure of his man, and Morgan knew that the mine manager regretted this now. He might have good reason to dispose of the too curious stranger. On the other hand, there was Faro Thorpe, who had been with Maxwell the last time Morgan had seen him. But there was no reason for Thorpe to be interested in Morgan's activities. Nevertheless, there had been two killers. They could have been Maxwell and Thorpe.

However, the very fact that there had been two men made Morgan remember that two

men had killed Stanley Burke in a guntrap. It was possible that the same two men had made the attempt on his life. That John Anderson could have been behind the deed was implausible. In the first place, he could not have known that Morgan was interested in him, and why arrange a killing if he was going to circumvent it with a violin?

This left Sam Trench as another possible suspect. Trench could have known of the trap to kill Meade, and he certainly knew that Morgan was taking too lively an interest in the proceedings. Further, there was a growing antipathy between the two of them. But why kill Morgan for it?

Of them all, Maxwell seemed the most likely culprit. At the same time, it could simply have been the two Burke killers who had learned that Morgan was agitating things and had acted on their own.

All of this passed through Morgan's mind as he and Anderson reentered the Palace. They met Marshal Quigley at the door.

"What's all this knife-throwin' ruckus?" demanded Quigley.

"Yore guess is as good as ours, Marshal," replied Morgan calmly. "Seen anything of Maxwell and Thorpe lately?"

"Yeah. They're in the card room back of the saloon—or they was till the excitement brought 'em out. Yuh catch either of the killers?"

"Nope," said Anderson. "Neither hide nor hair of 'em."

"Lemme see the knife," said Quigley, and Anderson handed it over.

It was a keen-bladed, stag handled hunting knife such as many men carried. There was neither mark nor initial by which to identify it.

"Huummm—such a knife as dozens of freighters, miners and cowboys carry," observed Quigley. "I don't recognize it."

"I didn't suppose yuh would," said Morgan dryly. He took the knife and put it into his pocket. "I reckon I inherit it since it was intended for me. It's all I got to show for fifty dollars' worth of fiddle I have to pay for."

Quigley squinted at him, tugging at his mustache.

"I reckon yuh don't understand my position, Morgan," he finally said. "I'll set yuh straight right now. Mebbe I don't seem so anxious to dig into things that happen outside of town, but lemme tell yuh I'm plenty interested in what takes place right here in my own bailiwick. I ain't droppin' this knife investigation just because I don't know whose knife it is. You or anybody else who starts trouble in Sand Wells will find out there's law here. Now, describe them two polecats to me."

Anderson obliged with a sketchy description of the pair.

"One wore tan chaps. The knife thrower was in plain work clothes, and I think he had on laced boots. I didn't see 'em good, but they was regular sized men. I'd say one was a cowboy and the other a miner, although they both had bandannas up around their mouths."

"Anything to add, Morgan?" Quigley asked.

"Nothin' about them two coyotes, Marshal, but somethin' about you," said Morgan admiringly. "I begin to believe yuh're an hosest lawman who takes his job serious. I apologize for thinkin' otherwise."

They went on inside where Thorpe and Maxwell were talking with Belle Howard and Sally Burke. Having already eliminated the two men as participants in the attempted knifing, Morgan produced a slim roll of folding money and started to pay the fiddler for his ruined instrument.

Thorpe quickly interposed. "None of that, Morgan," he said. "The house will pay for the damage. It's the least I can do. And thanks, Anderson, for being so handy. Either of you have any idea who made the attack? You have any enemies trailing you, Morgan?"

"Not that I know of."

"Perhaps you were mistaken for somebody else," went on Thorpe. "Your back was toward the door, I understand."

"That was likely it," agreed Morgan, in faint irony. "Bein' killed by mistake seems to happen right frequent in these parts."

HE GLANCED at Maxwell, and with a faint smile, Thorpe followed the look. But Maxwell was paying scant attention. He did not have the air of a guilty man as he talked with the two women.

Morgan noticed how quickly the gambler's smile faded, and shrewdly deduced that Thorpe and Maxwell both had found an interest in the queen of the dance hall. Belle Howard was apparently unaware of this.

"Sally wants to go back to the hotel," Belle said. "Which of you gents is going to escort her?"

Morgan opened his mouth to offer, but the red-headed Anderson beat him to it. Springing to the girl's side and tucking her hand gallantly under his arm, the owner of the PDQ outfit said that he would do so. The way he looked at the dark-eyed girl made Morgan reflect that another romance bade fair to start blooming.

"We'll both go," he said quietly. "I'd like to meet Miss Sally's mother."

"How about your card game, Anderson?" asked Maxwell jokingly.

"Oh, I'll be back," said the redhead hastily, scowling slightly at the unperturbed Morgan

for horning in.

"Let him be," Thorpe said to Maxwell indifferently. "He gambles too much for his own good. I'm glad to see him show other interests."

And Morgan was surprised at the genuine sincerity in the gambler's tone. Thorpe actually did not want to gamble with Anderson. Which was not in keeping with Thorpe's profession. Was Thorpe a bit afraid of Anderson's reactions when drinking, and anxious to keep his own skirts clear of any trouble over Abraham Meade?

CHAPTER VIII

Lynch Talk

WITH Sally Burke between them, Morgan and Anderson walked to the hotel. Morgan chatted lightly about the food to be found in Sand Wells, careful to shy away from mention of anything which most nearly concerned them.

"Hello," said Anderson, breaking his own silence when they reached the hotel. "Must be holdin' a town meetin' in the lobby."

A circle of some fifteen or twenty men surrounded the hotel owner who stood beneath the center chandelier of flickering kerosene lamps and harangued his listeners. Trench was talking loudly and earnestly, obviously arousing the men about something.

The trio halted just inside the entrance to listen.

"—taken enough from one stubborn old coot!" Trench was shouting angrily. "And I say it's high time we took action. Abe Meade's got no right to stand in the way of a whole town and countryside. A right-of-way for a spur railroad line through Eagle Cap won't hurt his place a bit. But will he allow it? No, sir! He plumb refuses, like a dog in the manger. I say us citizens has got to take action."

"Meade ought to be tarred and feathered!" shouted one of Trench's listeners.

"But even that ain't enough!" said Trench. "Folks has tried to persuade him, make him see things right, but he won't. Now we got to get up a big bunch and go after him—make him come around by force if we have to!"

Men cheered loudly at this. The hotel man was doing right well as a rabble rouser. And then Sam Trench dramatically played a trump card.

Coming down the stairs at this moment was a pale, slender woman who had the same dark eyes and proud bearing as Sally Burke. Her black hair, done high on her head, was streaked with gray.

"Mother!" exclaimed Sally. "She's worried about me."

Sam Trench, having seen the girl enter the lobby with the two men, now caught sight of Mrs. Burke descending the steps. He flung out one hand, pointing from mother to daughter.

"This trouble has gone beyond plain talk!" he thundered. "Only this mornin' an innocent stranger was shot down and killed up near Meade's place—just because he looked like Meade. Stanley Burke leaves behind him an invalid widow and a helpless daughter. Who's to blame for this tragedy?"

"Abe Meade!" yelled half a dozen men.

"Yuh're plumb right!" cried Trench. "For all we know, Meade may have killed that stranger himself, but no matter who pulled the trigger, Abe Meade is directly responsible for bereavin' this woman and her daughter. Matt Quigley can't do anything about it, but we as public-spirited citizens can. What'll we do about it? Do we stand by idly while innocent men are murdered?"

"No! No! Let's get Abe Meade! Lynch him!"

None of that talk seemed to make sense, but no mob ever exercised any reasoning ability. The resentment and anger against Abraham Meade that already was running high needed only a flimsy excuse to fan into destroying flame.

Wayne Morgan knew instantly that if violence was to be prevented right now was the moment to break it up. But he was already treading on dangerous ground himself. An attempt had just been made on his life. Not that this deterred him, but one more action on his part that could be resented and Wayne Morgan would be in such bad repute in town that he could not remain. And he had to have freedom of movement to carry out the plans he had made.

So he looked at John Anderson, wondering if the red-headed rancher would interpose, or would throw in with these men. Young Anderson's face was flushed and he was scowling. But he hesitated. It was obvious that he didn't care much what happened to his enemy, but he also knew that this mob action was wrong.

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" Trench was demanding truculently. "Let's form a vigilante committee right here and now and go after Meade!"

Men began milling around, shouting and brandishing guns. In short order excitement was reaching a high pitch. Morgan drew a deep breath and grimly prepared to lock horns with the hotel owner, no matter what the consequences might be. But he was spared the necessity of interfering by the lady on the stairs.

Mrs. Burke halted on the stairs and looked wildly around as the meaning of what she was seeing and hearing penetrated her understanding. She uttered a sharp cry.

"Oh, please, Mr. Trench," she pleaded, "don't do that! Please don't take any action because of my daughter and me. You mustn't do violence to Abraham Meade. He's not guilty of anything."

GRADUALLY the hubbub subsided as the angry mob turned to listen.

"Not guilty?" Trench thundered. "Madam, you don't know Abe Meade. He is a crook, a miser, a too proud old hellion, and a killer!" He jerked a thumb at John Anderson. "He cheated this young man's father out of the Old Anchor range, and now he's cheatin' the whole country out of a boom of prosperity! And to cap the climax, now he's killin' innocent men and makin' widows and orphans!"

"Oh, no—no!" cried Mrs. Burke piteously. "That isn't so! It can't be! Abe never shot my husband. Please listen to me! My husband was going to see Abe on a family matter. Abe Meade and Stanley Burke were first cousins."

"Huh?" Trench's jaw dropped ludicrously. "What's that?"

"My husband and Abe Meade were relatives," repeated Mrs. Burke. "That's why they looked something alike. We stopped here in Sand Wells on our way to Colorado just so they could meet. I know Abe Meade had nothing to do with my husband's death!"

This flabbergasted Trench, left him groping for words.

Morgan turned to the girl beside him, himself surprised.

"Didn't yuh know your dad and Meade were kinfolks, Sally?" he asked. "Yuh didn't tell us that at the funeral parlor."

"Of course, I knew it," said the girl, "but nobody asked me about that. Cousin Abe's name wasn't even mentioned to me. Is he really as terrible and—and bad as these men make out?"

"He's guilty of everything Trench said," Anderson said hotly, "except the killin' of yore father. Even I wouldn't accuse him of drygulchin' his own kinfolks, and I hate him worser'n a rattlesnake."

"Oh!" Sally drew away from him in dismay. Then, with a choking little cry, she darted across the lobby to her mother.

Morgan made a wry face and looked hard at Anderson.

"Looks like yuh split yore britches plumb down the back that time, young feller," he commented. "That is, if yuh're cottonin' to Sally Burke like I think yuh are. And when she finds out yuh ordered a coffin and headstone for Abe Meade yore chances are goin' to be about zero."

"Who told yuh about that?" demanded Anderson.

"Is it supposed to be a secret?" countered Morgan.

Anderson reddened and twisted uncomfortably. "I was plumb full of red-eye the day I done that," he admitted sheepishly. Then he added fiercely, "But I wasn't jokin'. Some day I'll have to kill Abe Meade."

"I've heard that yuh do quite a lot of drinkin'—and gamblin'," remarked Morgan in a casual tone. "Bad business for a young rancher if he wants to make a go of the cattle business."

"That's my own affair, Morgan," warned the redhead. "And I don't owe a gamblin' debt to anybody in the world. I squared up with Faro Thorpe day before yestiddy."

This was news. Morgan wanted to ask how the redhead had been able to do that, but he dared not. He had taken an immediate liking to like this reckless young profligate, but had already said more on such short acquaintance than most men could get away with. He looked over to where mother and daughter stood with arms about each other in the midst of a group of milling and gesticulating men who were shouting at Sam Trench.

"Don't reckon we can change the general opinion of Abe Meade," Anderson said, "but now's a good time to help turn the tide away from a necktie party. Ain't that a feller named Joe Blake, from yore outfit, in that bunch yellin' around Trench?"

"Yes, it is," answered Anderson, in apparent surprise. "Hey, Joe! Joe Blake! Yuh danged fool, the PDQ ain't takin' any hand in this kind of violence! I'll deal with Abe Meade in my own way!"

Blake looked around, shrugged, then reluctantly left the group and approached his employer. This cowboy's desertion seemed a signal for the breakdown of mob behavior. Surprisingly enough, Sam Trench already had cooled off completely and now was making abject apologies to Mrs. Burke and her daughter There was no more talk of lynching and rope law. Temporarily, violence had been averted. Feeling still ran high, but the mob spirit was broken.

As the men dispersed, arguing heatedly, John Anderson diffidently spoke to Sally Burke.

"I'm beggin' yore pardon, Miss Sally, for sayin' anything to hurt yore feelin's, but I didn't know yuh felt like this. I got my differences with Abe Meade, but I wouldn't raise a hand to harm him behind his back. Yuh got to believe that—please!"

The girl smiled faintly at him through her tears.

"I want to believe you, Mr. Anderson," she said. "This is my mother. And, Mother,

this is Mr. Morgan—the other man I told you about."

MRS. BURKE, still trembling from her recent excitement, greeted both men timidly. Then she said she would like to return to her room, and Anderson gallantly joined Sally in politely helping her up the stairs.

Morgan glanced after them, then looked at the still baffled and embarrassed hotel owner. To Morgan's discerning eye it was obvious the man was in a quandary of some sort. Hearing that the Burkes were related to Meade had knocked him back on his heels. He recovered himself with an effort as he faced Morgan.

"Still hangin' around town?" he grunted sourly. "The hotel's filled up, if that's what yuh want to know, Morgan."

"Well, that'll do for an excuse to get rid of me," Wayne Morgan said, without rancor. "I was just goin' to ask if Henry Maxwell didn't live here. He told me I'd find him at the hotel."

"He does, and he ain't here now," Trench said shortly.

"Thanks," said Morgan, who knew well enough that Maxwell was not in the hotel. "Was he up to the borax mines today, do yuh know?"

"I don't see how that's any of yore business, but he wasn't. He come back yesterday afternoon. Now I got some business to tend to. . . Hey, Joe!"

Unceremoniously he left Morgan and hastened across the lobby to join Joe Blake near the front entrance. They went out into the street together. Morgan followed more slowly, idly noting that Joe Blake wore a red silk neckerchief. And he recalled that the gun-toter who had been one of the two would-be assassins who had tried to end Wayne Morgan's earthly career had worn tan chaps and a red neckerchief. But so did dozens of other men.

Morgan reflected on Trench's attitude, and figured out a possible explanation. Were any plan afoot to get rid of Abraham Meade as an obstacle by killing him off, matters would be more complicated than ever now. It was one thing to dispose of a lone person who stood in the way; it was quite another if that person left relatives. If anything happened to Meade now, Sally Burke and her mother would become legal heirs of the Old Anchor spread, and this would tie the right-of-way up in a time-killing legal snarl.

Whatever the schemes, the cross-purposes —whatever the answer might be, Morgan decided it was time for him to call on Abraham Meade.

He went out into the night and headed for Kilgore's livery stable in order to get his roan horse.

CHAPTER IX

The Texas Hellion

IN SPITE of all the rumors concerning Abe Meade's wealth, the Old Anchor ranchhouse reflected no indications of opulence. The main building, built originally for a line shack by George Anderson and subsequently enlarged by Meade, was a comfortable but ordinary structure of four large rooms.

The barns and corrals were typical of thousands of such throughout the West. The fencing was scanty, and tools and equipment were conspicuous by their absence. Ten gallons of paint would have helped immeasurably.

Bordering on the rim of the dry and shimmering expanse called Dutchman's Desert, rising almost like a rugged coastline as a barrier to a sea of sand, the Old Anchor spread stretched southward to where it adjoined the slightly better rangeland of John Anderson.

The only logical opening for a trail to and from the desert was the wide, canyonlike gap called Eagle Pass. Through this a wide trail led down into the desert and wound its way across a mile of sand to the cluster of buildings erected by the Goddard Borax Mining Company. At the inner end of the pass, to the right side coming in, Abe Meade had built a small shack as a sort of tollhouse. There was a chair in the small shed and a sloping shelf from a ledger. Tied to the shelf was a heavy black lead pencil.

There was no gate-keeper. There was no gate. All freighters from the mines were supposed to stop and mark down in the ledger their passing with a load. Once a month Meade and Maxwell went over the ledger and had a settlement.

Southward the trail ran in a fairly straight line, almost bisecting the Old Anchor range, then angling across a section of the PDQ range across country to Sand Wells. Although in daily use, the trail did not pass in sight of the home buildings of either ranch. It was easily possible for a man to be killed on the trail and nobody on the ranches be aware of it.

Meade had only three men working for him, two cowhands and a slightly crippled oldster named "Limpy" Logan who was the cook. Limpy, a salty old codger, had once been a trail drover on the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Kansas. No longer able to ride and rope, he had been hired by Abe Meade because of past friendship. There wasn't enough stock or work to keep more than the other two men busy.

All in all, the Meade ranch appeared to

be a two-bit affair. Were it not for the freighting contract with the borax company and his recent gold strike, Meade would have been in rather sorry condition.

This was the set-up into which Blue Hawk rode and hit old man Meade for a job, along about twilight. The men were getting ready for supper when the Indian rode into the yard. Meade did not stir out of his heavy chair at the end of the dinner table when Blue Hawk halloed the house.

"Light down and come on in!" he yelled. "The door's wide open."

Blue Hawk did, halting on the threshold respectfully. He noticed the two lean, rangy cowboys flanking the old man, and recognized the cook for a hard-bitten ex-cowboy as he limped back and forth from the kitchen with bowls of food.

Meade himself was an impressive man. Some inches over six feet, he was portly without being fat. His hair was a bushy mane of gray. His features were craggy and sunburnt and his steel-gray eyes, as sharp as gimlets, were undimmed by any sign of encroaching age. His mouth, a wide, thin gash across his face, would have been friendly and humorous had it not been for the man's general air of arrogance.

"Well, blast my britches!" roared Meade in amazement, as he saw Blue Hawk. "An Injun grubline rider! Well, don't stand there like a roped steer. Come in and set down. Limpy, get another plate and eatin' tools. Every man is welcome to grub at the Old Anchor."

"Unless he works for Goddard and Maxwell," cackled Limpy Logan dryly.

"Shut up, yuh spavined old coyote!" roared Meade, his eyes flashing angrily. "Want to spoil my supper? Well, redskin? Yuh goin' to set down?"

"Thank you very much," said Blue Hawk. Advancing, he sat down on the bench beside one of the lanky cowboys. "My name is Eagle Feather."

"I didn't ask yuh yore name, did I?" thundered Meade. "Nobody cares here what is a man's handle or the color of his skin. I said for yuh to set and eat."

"Yes, senor," Blue Hawk said meekly.

"That's better," rumbled the old autocrat as the Indian silently filled his plate and started eating. "Settin' next to yuh is Gabe Harper. Across the table is Bronc Wilcox. Two of the hardest ridin' and straightest shootin' galoots who ever come out of Texas. That garrulous old fool is Limpy Logan. He rods this outfit when I ain't around."

"Yes, senor," repeated Blue Hawk, acknowledging the introductions politely. He noted that the old man did not trouble to name himself. But a king did not introduce himself.

THE meal was finished in comparative silence. No one spoke unless the old man at the head of the table spoke first. In such surroundings this courtly etiquette was almost ludicrous. But nobody here thought it strange.

Abe Meade polished off his hearty meal with a cup of black and scalding hot coffee.

"There!" he said with a gusty sigh. "That's the way a he-man from Texas drinks coffee. Strong as panther milk, and hot as the hinges of Hades. Now then, Redskin Eagle Tail, yuh stayin' the night?"

"If you have room, senor. Otherwise, I can camp out on range."

"Abe Meade always has room," thundered the old hellion. "Yuh savvy Spanish, Eagle?"

"Si, senor," replied Hawk quickly. "Habla Espanol."

"Well, don't hobble it here," ordered Meade. "We speak plain United States. Remember the Alamo! Texas! God bless her!"

Solemnly and proudly he bowed his head, as did the other three men. Blue Hawk discreetly lowered his own black-thatched pate. This act of obeisance must have found favor in the king's sight, for the old hellion spoke to him in a softer manner.

"There's plenty of room to bunk yuh, Red Tail," he said. "Yuh'll find an extra bunk out in the bunkhouse with Harper and Wilcox."

"Thank you, Senor. I—"

"Mr. Meade!" the old man thundred.

"Yes, Mr. Meade," Hawk said dutifully. "And if you can use extra hand, Eagle Feather will gladly work for keep for short time."

"What?" roared the old man. "An Injun lookin' for work? The millennium's at hand." Then he said, in a quieter voice, "Sorry, Red Feathers, there ain't any extra work on the Old Anchor. Not enough cattle to keep even two hands busy."

"How about the new gold mine, Mr. Meade?" asked Hawk. "I have worked in mines."

"Hey?" rumbled the old man in deep suspicion, while his three Texas employees eyed the Indian truculently. "Who said anything about workin' a gold mine?"

"But rumor in Sand Wells was of gold strike," explained Hawk.

"And yuh come sneakin' along, thinkin' to do some claim jumpin', eh?" growled Meade.

"No, senor," protested Hawk. "Eagle Feather just hear talk. Eagle Feather just want to work. I herd cattle, mend saddles, work in mine—do anything you need good hand for?"

"What was yuh doin' in Sand Wells?" demanded Meade harshly.

Harper and Wilcox laid hands on their six-

shooters while Limpy Logan limped over to flank Blue Hawk. It was a ticklish moment, and the Indian sensed the hostile tension his innocent words had caused. But his face showed no sign of uneasiness as he shrugged and answered calmly.

"Town was in way on trail. I ride through it. Pick up gossip in front of mine office. Just want to pay for keep."

There was a moment's strained silence as the old rancher considered this, his gimlet eyes boring into Hawk's steadfast black ones. Then he made a motion with his hand, and his three hired hands relaxed.

"The mine ain't bein' worked—yet," he said sourly. "Yuh can hang around tomorrer and mend some harness and boots if yuh want."

Blue Hawk found himself virtually a prisoner between Gabe Harper and "Bronc" Wilcox when he went out to the bunkhouse to bed. He smiled to himself at the thought of how easily he could give the two cowboys the slip during the night if he so desired.

But the morning sun found him peacefully falling in with the ranch work. He could not leave until he saw the Masked Rider, unless Meade drove him away. So he went to work mending bridles and boots after breakfast under the watchful eye of Limpy Logan, while the two cowboys rode out on the range. Abe Meade went to work fussing with his ledgers in his living room office.

It lacked an hour to noon when Harper and Wilcox came riding in together. They seemed as excited as laconic Texas cowboys could get. As they rushed into the house, Limpy Logan jerked his head at Blue Hawk and got to his feet.

"C'mon, Eagle Feathers," he said. "Let's go up to the house. Yuh can finish that job after dinner."

BLUE HAWK laid his mending work aside and followed the cook to the ranchhouse. They got there in time to hear the two riders making their reports.

"Mr. Meade," said Harper, "three of them danged freighters come through the pass this mornin' and didn't stop to register their loads. I was combin' the west section for strays when I saw 'em. I sat my hoss right above Eagle Pass and seen 'em drive on through as bold as brass. I was too far away to stop 'em, but I can ride after 'em if yuh want and bring 'em back."

Abraham Meade's brow clouded angrily.

"Danged sidewinders!" he bellowed. "I ought to hosswhip every one of 'em! But never mind losin' any good workin' time chasin' sneaks. I'll put it down. Maxwell keeps tally on the loads, too. He's a hard man to do business with, but he's honest enough. No use gettin' riled over that."

"You'll get plenty riled over this," offered Wilcox. "I rode down to the desert waterholes and I found them miners had cut our wires again and drove their mule stock in for water."

Abe Meade jumped as though he had been prodded with a hot poker.

"Why, them dirty buzzards!" he yelled. "I warned Maxwell I'd shoot the next man to cut through that fence. Them water-holes belong to the Old Anchor, and he'll pay me for any water he hauls back to the mines."

"He'll pay plenty for this mornin's water," said Wilcox significantly. "Two of his mules got bogged down in that patch of quicksand at the north hole. If they don't find them jassacks soon, they won't never find 'em."

"Two mules bogged down, huh?" said Meade quickly. "Yuh mean yuh left 'em in that fix?"

"Shore," said Wilcox, shrugging. "They're Goddard jassacks."

"Yuh locoed imitation of a Texas cowboy!" roared Abe Meade in high anger. "Them jassacks ain't to blame. They're just dumb animals. Anyhow, I wouldn't let any man's stock suffer, no matter what troubles I got with the man hisself. You fork yore bronc and skeedaddle right back out there and pull them mules out of that muck. Gabe Harper, you go along and help."

"Yes, sir," cried both men, and ran hastily out of the house.

"Take wire with yuh and patch that fence!" Meade bawled after them. "And if yuh catch Hank Maxwell anywheres around, throw him into the quicksand and step on his face."

As Blue Hawk started peeling potatoes for Limpy Logan in the kitchen he commented gravely:

"Mr. Meade is a strange man. He does good things as well as bad things, si?"

"What's that?" demanded Limpy Logan, whirling on the Indian. "Abe Meade never done a crooked thing in his life, redskin, and any man lies who says so! Why, just because he's a proud-steppin' old galoot don't mean nothin'. He's got a heart as big as a bucket. Yuh know how he come to be planted here on this gosh-awful dry range in the first place?

"He worked four or five years prospectin' this whole area for a man named Anderson who was locoed on the idea that gold was on this range. After he put up a lot of his own money and all that time, it turned out that Anderson didn't have the money to pay Abe for his work. So Abe, like a danged fool, agreed to take half of the Old Anchor range in payment. And since then—it was three years ago next fall—Abe's sunk all the money

he had in the world into this place, tryin' to make it pay. George Anderson skinned Abe Meade out of five thousand dollars—less what this place was worth, and I wouldn't of give five hundred dollars for it myself."

"But now Mr. Meade has found gold mine," pointed out Blue Hawk. "And he has toll contract with borax mine."

"Yeah," admitted the cook hesitantly. "But Maxwell is tryin' to steal a strip of land through this range for practically nothin' for a spur right-of-way, and—"

"Limpy!" bellowed Abe Meade from the living room. "Shut up! Yuh talk too danged much with yore mouth. Send Tail Feathers back out to the tack room, and fix me some dinner."

"Yes, sir!" yelled the cook promptly. Then, in a low voice to Blue Hawk "Yuh can finish peelin' them spuds first, but don't waste no time. And take the peelin's out to the chickens."

A FEW minutes later Blue Hawk carried the pan of potato parings out with him. There was a smile about his lips as he emptied it for the few scrawny hens to cackle and fight over. A hoarse, stern voice made him stiffen and wheel, staring toward the rear corner of the nearest shed.

"What for yuh smile so big, Chief?"

There at the corner of the shack stood the Masked Rider, with Midnight peering over his shoulder.

"Senor!" exclaimed Blue Hawk in a glad voice. He put down his pan and walked swiftly toward the Masked Rider. "Senor, I have something to report."

They stood there behind the shed while Blue Hawk rapidly related all that he had seen and heard since coming here. The Masked Rider listened in silence, nodding at times.

"That's good, Hawk," he said approvingly when the Indian had finished. "When yuh leave here go to town and hang around the Mexican cantina to wait for me. While yuh're there, see what yuh pick up about a miner who's a knife-thrower and a cowboy in tan chaps and red neckerchief who tried to drygulch Wayne Morgan last night."

As he swiftly gave the Indian the details of his experience in the Dance Palace the night before, Blue Hawk's eyes began to glitter.

"Shall I kill hombres when I find them, Senor?" he asked grimly.

"No, Hawk," the Masked Rider said in a grave voice. "Just find 'em if yuh can. If yuh do—I think they'll be the men who killed Stanley Burke."

"Bueno. What you do now, Senor?"

"Right now I think it's time to have a talk with Abe Meade. From what you tell me, he don't know yet what has happened."

"He is in living room of ranchhouse, Senor. I will keep cook from getting nosy."

CHAPTER X

Trouble Brewing

HEARING a slight sound on the threshold, Abraham Meade looked up quickly. He froze, his lower jaw sagging as he saw a masked man in black sombrero and black cloak regarding him from the doorway.

"What in tarnation's this?" he managed to gurgle. "I thought the James boys was operatin' in Missouri and Kansas."

"Take it easy, Abraham Meade," replied the Masked Rider in his harsh voice. "I am not a road agent Yuh don't guess who I am?"

"Why—why, yes!" exclaimed Meade, recognition dawning in his eyes. "You must be the Masked Rider!"

"That's what they call me," admitted his visitor.

Entering slowly, he approached the table behind which the old rancher sat.

"What in heck do yuh want with me?" demanded Meade arrogantly. "I ain't robbin' anybody, and I shore as blazes didn't send for yuh."

"What yuh do remains to be learned, Abraham Meade," said the Masked Rider in a grim voice. "But I came here to talk to yuh about another matter. What do yuh know about a man named Stanley Burke?"

"Who?" Meade asked sharply. "Stan Burke? He's in Shrevesport."

"His body is in Snodgrass' funeral parlor in Sand Wells," said the Masked Rider.

"Yuh're loco! I wrote Burke at Shrevesport only last month."

"He was killed on the borax trail just south of here yesterday mornin'," the Masked Rider said sternly. "He must have been on his way to see yuh. His widow and daughter are stranded right now in Sand Wells."

"It ain't so!" cried Meade, his eyes going wide with horror. "Tell me what yuh know, or I'll shoot yore heart out before yuh can draw them shootin' irons of yores."

"Don't make any sudden moves, Mr. Meade. Yuh ain't so popular in this country nowadays. Nothin' much would be done about anybody who killed yuh. Just shut up and listen. I'll tell yuh, then you answer a few questions."

Quickly the Masked Rider gave all known details about the killing of Stanley Burke,

omitting only his own examination of the murder spot and his subsequent deductions. The old rancher sat listening in stricken silence.

"Now then," concluded the Masked Rider, "what business did Burke have with yuh?"

Abe Meade stirred and sighed. "I reckon he was comin' here to get the money I promised him," he answered heavily. "The crazy fool! I wrote him to stay in Shrevesport till I could raise it and send it to him."

"What money?" demanded the Masked Rider.

"Money to take Mary, his wife, to Colorado for her health. He wrote and asked to borrer money, and I promised it to him. But I had to get it first. Poor Mary and Sally! I got to go to town at once and get 'em. I've got to give Stan a decent burial. I—"

"Hold on!" ordered the Masked Rider. "It's as much as yore own life is worth for yuh to go to Sand Wells. Feelin' is runnin' high against yuh."

"Who cares a hoot?" snarled Meade. "I got to take care of my own flesh and blood."

"Yuh got any idea who might have killed yore cousin—if he was mistaken for you."

"Shore," Meade said promptly. "Hank Maxwell. I filed on a gold claim just in time to keep him from gettin' a strip of my range condemned for a railroad right-of-way. That dirty rattlesnake! Now I'll go gunnin' for him shore enough. But first I got to go to town."

"Yuh don't think John Anderson could be mixed up in this?"

Meade snorted. "That young rannihan? I never have any truck with him. All he's got time to do is drink and gamble away what little his dad left him."

"He's threatened to kill yuh for the trimmin' yuh gave his father. He's even paid for a coffin for yuh."

Meade's rage became majestic. "Why, the rambunctious young jughead! I'll stuff him in that box his ownself. I'll—"

"Wait! Just what was the deal between you and Anderson's father?"

ABE MEADE calmed down and stared at his visitor. Answering questions went against the grain, but he mastered himself slowly.

"It ain't none of yore concern, Masked Rider," he said, mildly for him, "but I'll tell yuh. I run up a bill of five thousand dollars against George Anderson, workin' and prospectin' for him over a period of nigh on to four years. He didn't have the money, so I agreed to take the north half of his ranch in settlement. There was one foolish condition I agreed to. If, any time within five years, George or his son could raise the money to pay off the debt to me the Old Anchor goes back to the Anderson family.

"That was three years ago. There's two more to run. Which don't bother me any. Young Anderson couldn't raise five thousand dollars in five thousand years the rate he's goin'. But meantime I can't sell or give this place away. I got to hold it sort of in trust for two more years."

"Is this deal in writin'?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Shore. It's plumb legal."

"Have yuh figgered that young Anderson might get backin' somewheres now and buy the property back so's he could get possession of yore new gold mine?"

"Wouldn't do him any good. I filed on the mineral rights of the land in my own name just recent. He'd get the range, and I'd keep the gold mine."

"But suppose yuh was to die sudden—like Stanley Burke?"

"My heirs would get the mine."

"Now, yes. But suppose somebody had planned to kill yuh before they knew yuh had any relatives?"

"Are yuh tryin' to make me believe that John Anderson's the man who killed Stanley Burke?"

"No. Because I don't think he had anything to do with it. But yuh've got to take all sides into consideration. For instance, in view of this agreement yuh had with George Anderson, how can yuh sell the borax people a right-of-way at any price?"

"I won't sell," Meade said bluntly. "I'll only lease 'em a right-of-way at my price. And that's what is holdin' up the deal. They won't meet my terms. But I've had enough of this foolish talk. I got to go to town."

"Mr. Meade, this talk ain't foolish. Hid somewheres behind all this tangle is the reason for tryin' to kill yuh. Or, at least it was the reason before the Burkes showed up. Unless yuh've lied to me."

The old Texan looked as though he were about to explode. He leaped to his feet and came around the table to stare down into the Masked Rider's face from his incredible height. The Masked Rider was well over six feet tall himself.

"Look here!" thundered Meade. "Abe Meade don't lie to no man. I didn't have to tell yuh this much, and I ain't goin' to tell yuh anything more. Now get out of my house and tend to yore own ear-markin'. . . . Limpy! Limpy Logan! Hitch up the buckboard for me right now. I'm goin' to Sand Wells."

"Yes, sir," answered the voice of the cook from the kitchen.

"What yuh aimin' to do, Mr. Meade?" asked the Masked Rider.

"What any decent man would do!" roared the old rancher. "I'm bringin' the womenfolks back to this ranch. I'm goin' to give my

cousin a decent buryin'. They ain't goin' to plant him in Boot Hill."

"I'm advisin' yuh not to go to Sand Wells," warned the Masked Rider. "Whether yuh're right or wrong, practically every man's hand is raised against yuh. Last night Mary Burke and John Anderson narrowly succeeded in breakin' up a lynch mob that was gatherin' to come after yuh. Stay here, Abraham Meade, and I'll help yuh in this Burke affair."

"I don't need yore help, Masked Rider," declared Meade angrily. "And there ain't enough men in Sand Wells to hang me! Confound yuh, quit hinderin' me!"

"At least take yore two cowboys with yuh."

"I'll do nothin' of the sort!" roared the old hellion. "They got work to do, and I'm a whole cussed tea party all by myself!"

Seeing he could do nothing further here, the Masked Rider shrugged. It looked as though he had stirred up a hornet's nest in approaching Abe Meade at all. But he did not regret it. He had learned something, and things were slowly falling into places. Soon, with any luck at all, he felt that he would unravel the mystery. And there was still retribution to be dealt out, and two women who must be compensated as far as possible for the tragedy which had befallen them.

WHAT the Masked Rider had learned about Abe Meade was, that in spite of his haughty arrogance, the old man had an astonishing sense of fairness. He was not the grasping, selfish villain everybody seemed to believe. Still he was up to something that was not clear. What was sharply clear was that ructions were going to pop in Sand Wells before night.

One thought was uppermost in the Masked Rider's mind. Maxwell had said that he would have the freighter, Hardwick, stop by and notify the Meade outfit of the killing. Why hadn't he done so? Was it because the dead man had been proved not to be Abe Meade, or did the mine manager have an ulterior motive? Surely he had learned last night that Burke was Meade's cousin. Or was he so wrapped up in his pursuit of Belle Howard that he let other things slide? Definitely Maxwell was not a man to let anything slide.

The Masked Rider went out of the house in company with the irate owner of the Old Anchor. Without speaking another word to the masked man, Meade stepped into the buckboard and grabbed the reins of the pair of restive mustangs.

"Clean up the house, Limpy," he ordered. "I'm bringin' two ladies home with me."

"Yes, sir," answered the cook.

Limpy scrambled out of the way as he released the bridle of the near mustang. Then he shouted after the old man who was already whipping his team out of the yard:

"When'll yuh get back, Abe?"

"As soon as I kill the polecat who shot my cousin!" Meade yelled back over his shoulder. And he rattled on down the road in a cloud of dust like a miniature tornado hunting a place to strike.

Blue Hawk, standing nearby, looked at the Masked Rider for his cue.

"Go to town at once, Hawk," ordered the masked man crisply. "There's goin' to be trouble."

Limpy Logan approached in time to catch the last word.

"Trouble?" he repeated, eying the man in black curiously. "So yuh're the famous Masked Rider. Well, lemme tell yuh, mister, Abe Meade is used to meetin' trouble head-on."

"This time he's goin' to," said the Masked Rider harshly. "I couldn't stop him. Adios."

He whistled shrilly. There was an answering neigh, and Midnight came galloping around the house. The Masked Rider took three swift strides and vaulted into saddle as the great horse thundered by.

Limpy Logan watched in admiration. When his eyes had followed the Masked Rider out of sight, he turned to speak to the red man. The Indian had disappeared.

"What in blazes!" muttered the old cook uneasily. "Trouble, huh? Always trouble."

He limped on into the house and pulled open a kitchen drawer. Fishing out his six-shooter and holster, he examined the gun, then strapped it about his thin waist. He limped on out to the corral to saddle the mare he always rode.

"Trouble, eh?" he muttered again. "I got to round up Bronc and Gabe first off. You bet there's goin' to be plenty trouble if any coyote lays a finger on Abe Meade."

CHAPTER XI

Knife-Thrower

MORGAN stopped by the canyon hide-out only long enough to leave Midnight and his black Masked Rider garb which he had discarded and placed in his saddle roll. Then he saddled his roan and went on to town. It was late afternoon by the time he rode along the main street, but he figured that, in spite of his enforced detour, he was far ahead of Abe Meade.

He stabled his horse at Kilgore's livery stable and walked toward the lower end of town. The first thing he wanted to do was

establish contact with Blue Hawk, but he saw no sign of the Indian. The town seemed quiet. It was a deceptive quiet, though, like the lull before a storm.

Business was picking up gradually at the Aguila Roja—the Red Eagle cantina, where a mixture of Mexicans and Texans were straggling in and out for wine and the rather coarse entertainment. After sauntering past the dive, Morgan went across the street to a little Mexican café for a bowl of chili and beans.

He was still sitting there, contemplating his next move, when Blue Hawk came in. The Indian seated himself at the counter next to Morgan without making any sign of recognition. He ordered tamales. As the counterman went back to the greasy kitchen to fill the order, Blue Hawk spoke rapidly out of the side of his mouth.

"I've been in cantina, Senor. Many men come and go. But I was most interested in two men who sit in corner and talk and drink I could not get close enough to hear, but I learn that one is freighting man called Hardwick and other is PDQ cowboy named Blake. You mentioned those names to me. Perhaps it is odd they are together, Senor?"

"Shore is, under the circumstances," Morgan agreed brittlely. "But that proves nothin'. You go back and keep an eye on 'em while I see if Maxwell and Anderson are somewheres in town. Mebbe we can surprise some information out of the four of 'em if we manage to herd 'em together. I'll try to fix up a meetin' at Maxwell's office. We must work fast if we hope to keep any more bloodshed away from this town."

"Bueno, Senor. You think you had better get town marshal to keep eye on Sam Trench?"

"I don't know. Trench seems to have had all the starch taken out of him for the time bein', but if he's mixed up in Burke's killin' we'll bring it to light."

Further conversation was interrupted by the return of the Mexican waiter with Blue Hawk's order. Morgan paid his bill and went out without a glance at the Indian. His conviction that Hardwick and Blake were the two men who had tried to kill him the previous night was growing strong. Whether or not they had guntrapped Burke, Morgan intended to learn as soon as possible. Only by bringing the real culprits to justice could he hope to avert serious trouble between Meade and the entire town.

In spite of his anxiety and need for haste, Morgan found no trace of Anderson. He finally located Maxwell at the dance hall, visiting with Belle Howard in the almost deserted dance room and doing very well for himself. The mine manager was patently annoyed when Morgan horned in. Belle, never averse to playing one man against another, welcomed Morgan cordially.

"Still alive and kicking, cowboy?" she greeted. "You'd better ask me for that dance while you're still able to move around."

"Thanks," replied Morgan, smiling. "I'll claim that dance soon—if yuh think Faro Thorpe won't object."

"Why should he?" Belle flared up quickly. "He don't own me. We're just business partners."

"I might want to say something about that myself, Morgan," Maxwell said flatly.

"Yuh needn't," Morgan assured him. "By the way, it's you I want to talk with a bit, Maxwell. When will yuh be goin' back to yore office?"

Maxwell glanced outside. It was beginning to grow dark.

"Not tonight," he answered shortly. "There's no use talking to me, anyway. I told you that last night."

"It ain't the job, Maxwell," Morgan said, eying the man steadily. "It's somethin' else."

"What?" demanded Maxwell suspiciously.

"About Stanley Burke."

"What about him?"

MORGAN reached into his pocket and drew out the missing boot heel. He held it up delicately between forefinger and thumb.

"This is the heel missin' from Burke's left boot," he said. "Ever see it before?"

The mine manager looked surprised, but not startled. He didn't bat an eye.

"I didn't know one of his heels was missing," he clipped. "Where did you get it?"

"At the spot where Burke was killed—by two drygulchers," Morgan said grimly. "Yuh'll note the six-shooter slug almost buried in this heel. Burke was shot in the head with a thirty-thirty rifle."

"Oh!" exclaimed Belle Howard. "So that's where you've been today?"

"Yes." admitted Morgan. He figured that a matter of one day wouldn't make any difference in the truth being known, and of course he knew that nobody was aware that he had visited the murder spot in the guise of the Masked Rider.

"And why do you show this evidence to me?" demanded Maxwell thinly. "Why not give it to Marshal Quigley?"

"Quigley has already stated his position," Morgan said evenly. "I thought you were the logical man to see this. By the way, you didn't send Hardwick to notify Meade of Burke's death. He is still hangin' around town—with a PDQ rider. What sort of a pistol shot is Hardwick?"

Jolted at last out of his calm, Maxwell got abruptly to his feet.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Mor-

gan, and you're heading for serious trouble. But if you want to talk to me, I'll meet you at my office in half an hour. So long, Belle. I'll see you later this evening."

He strode out.

Belle surveyed Morgan critically. "You're a deep man, Morgan," she said slowly. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"I'm just sorry for two defenseless women, ma'am, and I want to see justice done," he told her frankly.

She searched his strong face anxiously, slowly shaking her head.

"You know, I think you're a big fool for mixing up in this affair without a law badge to back you up," she said. "But the more I see of you the better I like you."

"Puttin' me in a class with Thorpe and Maxwell?" he asked quizzically, his eyes twinkling.

"I darn well could," admitted Belle candidly, "but I can see plainly enough that you're not a woman's man. I knew that the first minute I saw you over at the funeral parlor. You don't have to worry about Sally Burke and her mother. I've got both of them safe upstairs in my quarters, and I'll watch out for them. You'd better make tracks and forget all about this. You had a narrow squeak last night right here in this hall."

"Yuh don't know anything about that?" he asked.

"Not a thing," said Belle Howard. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she stared straight into his eyes. "But if I did, I'd be fool enough to tell you."

And before he was aware of her intent, she kissed him firmly on the mouth, then drew back. Without another word she walked to the stairs near the archway and swiftly ascended, never glancing back.

Morgan stared after her, a strange emotion stirring him. That kiss had been a sort of benediction. Any kiss was unusual as far as this stern man of the out-trails was concerned.

"Belle Howard and Abe Mead," Morgan muttered. "Two mighty strange people."

He went out into the gathering dusk to continue his search for John Anderson.

Just as he thought his efforts were doomed to failure he saw the red-headed young ranchman striding toward him along the high board fence of Snodgrass' undertaking yard. He quickened his step and was just opening his mouth to hail Anderson when his keen eyes noticed that the yard gate was silently opening just behind Anderson's back. At the same instant the cry of a mountain lion came from a dark spot across the street.

In the twilight a bulky figure sprang out of the undertaker's yard and raised an arm high to bring a knife down into the unsuspecting Anderson's back. Quick as thought, Morgan drew and fired.

Morgan's bullet struck Anderson's attacker in the chest, blasting him back and slamming him against the still swinging gate. At the impact of his body the gate creaked loudly and then shuddered on backward, letting the attacker drop out of sight.

ANDERSON, startled by the shot and the sound of the slug whining so close past his head, dropped into a crouch, looking wildly in both directions. The cry of the mountain lion had done nothing to allay his confusion.

"Take it easy, Anderson!" called Morgan, running forward. "A feller just tried to knife yuh, and I had to shoot him."

"Morgan!" cried Anderson, as his hand slapped down for his own gun. "I wish yuh'd call yore shots, mister."

They reached the undertaker's yard together. Anderson stumbled over his attacker, which brought a deep groan from the man on the ground. Instantly the rancher struck a match, and Morgan knelt to search the wounded man for other weapons.

"One of Maxwell's men!" cried Anderson in amazement.

"Yeah—Hardwick," agreed Morgan laconically. "And look what he was usin'—a butcher knife."

"Why, the murderin' rattlesnake!" barked Anderson, but he shuddered, too.

"Don't get the shakes now," counseled Morgan. "Yuh saved me from the same thing last night without turnin' a hair."

"Yuh shore paid me back prompt," declared Anderson. "Hey, what yuh doin'?"

He struck another match and cupped it, holding it down to observe Morgan's actions. Morgan was ripping open the freighter's bloody shirt. He revealed an empty knife sheath at the man's waist.

"Ah!" he breathed. "Just what I thought?"

"Hey, what's goin' on out here?" called the mournful voice of Ebenezer Snodgrass. "Who got shot, and how bad?"

"We can't leave him here," Morgan said quickly, as he got to his feet. "Help Mr. Snodgrass get him into the house, Anderson. I'll be with yuh in a minute."

He hurried through the gate and ran swiftly across the street to a dark spot between two buildings where he had seen a flash of white. Blue Hawk was waiting for him.

"The two men I watch separated, Senor," the Indian quickly explained. "I had to choose one to follow, so I took Hardwick because he stole butcher knife at cantina. I make mountain lion call when I see you come in time to help stranger." He finished grimly, "If you not there Blue Hawk throw knife himself."

"Yuh did right, Hawk. I can't have you

gettin' in trouble, too. Did yuh see Henry Maxwell? He left the dance hall a while ago, and he had time to fix up some sort of trap."

"No, Senor. Hardwick met no one after leaving Blake. He hid in yard, and I hid over here to watch. Not see Maxwell."

"He's not in his office," Morgan said hastily. "Well, yuh won't have to watch Hardwick any more. Go get on the trail of Joe Blake and freeze to him!"

CHAPTER XII

Marshal Quigley Acts

LEAPING back across the street, Wayne Morgan entered the funeral parlor to find that the fat little undertaker and Anderson had placed the murderous Hardwick on a couch. The freighter's eyes were open and he was breathing lightly, but plainly he was dying. Anderson who had explained things to Snodgrass, and the undertaker were watching somberly.

Morgan drew from his pocket the knife that had been intended for his back the previous night and approached the couch. Hardwick watched him with apathy as the tall cowboy exposed the knife sheath once more and slipped the knife into the scabbard. It fitted perfectly.

"So it was you who tried to knife me last night, Hardwick," Morgan said sternly. "You and Joe Blake. Yuh're a better knife-thrower than a pistol shot, ain't yuh?"

The dying man looked at him blankly. Snodgrass and Anderson crowded closer to see and hear this little drama they did not understand. Morgan fished the boot heel from his pocket and held it before Hardwick's eyes.

"Yuh tried to shoot the man yuh thought was Meade," he accused. "Yuh shot off his heel and knocked him down so's Blake could come out of the thicket and finish him off with a rifle. And because yuh was afraid of what I might learn yuh tried to kill me last night."

Hardwick's eyelids fluttered and a faint sneer showed around his pale lips.

"Smart, ain't yuh?" he whispered.

"Too smart for you," agreed Morgan. "Neither yuh nor Joe Blake are smart enough to plan this thing. Who's the man behind yuh? Who ordered yuh to kill Abe Meade, and then me? Was it Henry Maxwell?"

[*Turn page*]

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"Hey!" exclaimed Anderson. "Joe Blake, yuh say? Why, Blake's one of my cowboys. He—"

"Wait!" Morgan ordered curtly. "Answer me, Hardwick. Yuh're dyin', man. Get this confession done with, for the good of yore soul. Why did yuh just try to kill Anderson? Who's yore boss that gives orders like that?"

Morgan's questions tumbled over each other in his haste, but it was too late. Hardwick would never answer another earthly voice. He had died with that faint, enigmatical sneer about his ugly lips.

"He's gone," said Snodgrass dolefully. He dropped the wrist in which he had been feeling the pulse. "Yuh made quite a mess of his wish-bone, Morgan."

"Why did yuh open his shirt, Morgan?" demanded the mystified Anderson. "Did yuh know he had an empty knife sheath on him?"

"To tell the truth, I was lookin' for somethin' else," Morgan said grimly. "But I wasn't surprised to find the knife sheath. I had already suspected Hardwick and Blake of bein' the killers of Stanley Burke."

"Why do yuh accuse Blake, one of my men?" demanded Anderson in resentment.

"I'll explain it all to yuh later, Anderson. Yuh wouldn't believe me now, and I haven't any legal proof. First, tell me one thing. Yuh've got an agreement made between your father and Abe Meade three years ago. Where is it?"

"How did you know about that?" asked Anderson, startled.

"Never mind that now. Where do yuh keep it?"

"Why, I—I haven't got it any more," faltered Anderson in frowning bewilderment. "I sold it to Faro Thorpe to square up my gamblin' debt to him."

At this bit of information the answer to the whole bewildering puzzle flashed across Morgan's mind.

"Oh, ho!" he said exultantly "Anderson, yuh've just told me what Hardwick wouldn't, and yuh've told me why yuh was attacked! They were goin' to kill yuh because yuh wasn't needed in their schemes any longer. In fact, yuh might prove troublesome because of yore hate for Abe Meade."

"What in tarnation are yuh talkin' about?" demanded Anderson in complete exasperation.

Morgan did not have the chance to explain. For at that moment the front door banged open, and Marshal Quigley came trotting into the house.

"I heard a shot," he said curtly, glancing around at the group, then letting his eyes rest on the gory figure on the couch. "A couple of fellers come runnin' to tell me somebody was killed. . . . Uummm—Hardwick, eh? One of Maxwell's crew. Who done it?"

"I shot him, Quigley," Morgan said coolly. "He was just about to stab John Anderson. He's one of the men who tried to kill me last night."

"That so?" demanded Quigley. "Who said so?"

"I do," said Anderson emphatically.

"All right," Quigley mildly agreed, "but this has got to be investigated legal. Want to tell me yore side of the story now, Morgan, or wait till after I lock yuh up?"

"Yuh're not goin' to lock this feller up," Anderson declared truculently. "He saved my life and—"

"Let me handle this, Anderson," interposed Morgan, giving him an elbow nudge.

HE MOVED over to confront the marshal.

"Yuh don't seriously mean yuh want to throw me into the calaboose, do yuh, Marshal?" he drawled.

"I don't mean nothin' else," snapped the peace officer. "Understand, I ain't sayin' yuh won't come clear, but I told yuh last night that I'm the Law in Sand Wells—and this killin' took place in town. I'm lockin' yuh up till I can investigate this business plumb complete. I reckon yuh'll come along peaceable." He started to reach for his gun.

"I hate to do this, Marshal," Morgan said reluctantly, "but I have to." With a grunt, he swung his right first against Quigley's jaw without the slightest warning.

The marshal grunted also, jerked, went glassy-eyed, and then folded to the floor like a winded concertina. Before he hit, Morgan was whirling on the other two men.

"You take care of Hardwick, Snodgrass," he said. "Anderson, watch yoreself till I see yuh again. Yuh're in danger. I've got to run. I've got too much to do to let Quigley lock me up. Adios for now."

He darted out into the night.

He almost groaned aloud as he saw the buckboard and lathered, steaming team of mustangs that was pulling up in front of the funeral parlor. Abe Meade had arrived, and Morgan could no longer stay here to avert trouble.

In the funeral parlor Eben Snodgrass and John Anderson looked at each other blankly. The fat little undertaker mopped the bald top of his head and nodded at the prone figure of the peace marshal.

"I knew Morgan was goin' to cut loose on somebody, but I thought shore it was goin' to be Sam Trench," he said sadly.

Outside, Abe Meade leaped out of his buckboard and stalked into the funeral parlor like an angry lion, the crown of his hat

scraping the lintel of the door.

"Snodgrass!" he bellowed. "Eben Snodgrass! Where is he?"

"Why, hello, Mr. Meade," intoned the little undertaker apprehensively. "Who do yuh mean?"

"Stanley Burke!" roared the old hellion savagely. "Where's his body?"

"In the back room, Mr. Meade. I was holdin' it accordin' to the marshal's orders."

"Well, yuh ain't holdin' it no longer."

The old man's fierce eyes swept the scene in the front parlor, noting the dead man on the couch, the unconscious peace officer on the floor, and John Anderson standing there frowning. Bizarre as the tableau was, it didn't even faze the old hellion. He passed it over as a matter of no importance, because he wasn't interested in anything now but the business which had brought him to town.

"Show me the body so's I can identify it," he ordered peremptorily. "If it is Stan Burke, I'm goin' to skin some dirty skunk alive! I'll take this cussed town apart. Where's my womenfolks? Where's Hank Maxwell?"

"I don't rightly know the answers to all yore questions," said Snodgrass sadly. "But come on back here to view the remains."

The old Texas hellion stormed after the fat little undertaker, almost stepping on him and causing him to scurry out of the way like a fat tabby cat.

The thunder of his voice and the noise of his passage aroused the recumbent peace marshal. Quigley groaned, opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He started to rub his aching jaw, and became fully conscious.

"Where is that ornery trouble-maker?" he demanded of Anderson as he scrambled to his feet.

"If yuh mean Morgan," said Anderson, "he's gone. He slugged yuh and ran out."

"Why didn't yuh stop him?"

Anderson looked his contempt. "Yuh got no call to arrest Morgan, Quigley."

"The devil I ain't," grunted the marshal grimly. "I'm the Law in this town, and I'm goin' to throw Morgan in jail the minute I clap eyes on him till he's been duly cleared of murder. . . Who's that shoutin' in the back room?"

"Abe Meade's come to town, and he's on the prod," informed Anderson. "Yuh're about to find yore hands full, mister."

Quigley, whatever else he may have been, was no coward. He started grimly for the back room. Anderson followed him

"That's my cousin, all right," Abe Meade was growling in a slightly modulated roar. "Put him in the finest coffin yuh got, Snodgrass, and get him ready for a first-class funeral. And don't skimp none. We'll hold the funeral in the mornin'. Now, I'm goin' to the hotel and hunt up—"

"Just a minute, Abe Meade," said Snodgrass sadly. "I ain't got but one coffin made up right now, and—"

"Use it, Snodgrass," ordered Anderson sharply.

FOR the first time Meade took cognizance of his neighboring rancher.

"The box you ordered for me, eh, John?" he said to Anderson in a mild tone. "I don't reckon you killed Stanley Burke by mistake, Anderson. Yuh ought to know me too well to make an error like that."

"I do," said Anderson, standing quiet but flushing to the roots of his red hair. "And I ain't apologizin' to yuh for anything I do, Abe Meade."

"Humph!" snorted Meade. He was angry clean through, but there was something of admiration in his expression for this young rooster who stood up to him. "I'll tend to you later, John Anderson. Yuh've made yore boast, and when I get time I'll see that yuh have a chance to live up to it."

"Come gunnin' when yuh're ready," said Anderson grimly. "Personal, I've changed my mind about yuh. I wouldn't harm a white hair in yore stubborn old head unless you shoot first."

"There's goin' to be plenty of shootin'," declared the old man.

"There's already been too much," said Marshal Quigley firmly. "That freighter in the front room was killed tonight. I gather that he was the feller who shot yore cousin, Meade, and I'll clear that up as soon as I get hold of the man who shot the freighter."

"Freighter?" shouted Abe Meade. "A Maxwell man, huh? That's what I thought. Soon's I locate Burke's womenfolks I'll see Hank Maxwell."

He started out, but Marshal Quigley stubbornly got in his way.

"Hold on, Meade," he said, with grim determination. "Yuh ain't popular in Sand Wells, and I'm warnin' yuh not to stir up any more trouble than there already is. I'll handle this business."

"You tend to yore own knittin'," advised Meade, brushing him aside and starting onward. "And stay out of my way!" he called over his shoulder.

Marshal Quigley stood for a moment, his face flushed, his jaw hard. It was not pleasant to have his authority brushed aside as if it amounted to nothing. But Meade was a hard man to tie into, and Quigley certainly didn't want to call Meade's hand at this moment. The marshal's luck was bad.

Quigley turned and stared at the little undertaker, who shifted uneasily on his feet. Then the marshal looked at Anderson, who grinned mockingly at him.

CHAPTER XIII

Enter The Masked Rider

RUSHING out in the street, Abe Meade leaped into his buckboard and drove his team lickety-split down the street to the hotel. Hurling his reins to a roustabout idling near the front door, he gave an order.

"Take this team to Kilgore's and see that they get a good rubdown and a good feedin' after they've cooled off. Do it right, or I'll trim yore long ears off."

He stormed on inside and caught sight of Sam Trench just coming out of the dining room. He pounced on the hotel keeper like a mastiff grabbing a terrier. Trench's jaw dropped and he went white. But there was no escaping that human tornado.

"Trench!" roared the old hellion, clutching him by the shoulder and shaking him fiercely. "Where's Mary and Sally Burke? What room they in?"

"They—they're not at the hotel, Mr. Meade," gasped Sam Trench. "Leave go, and I'll tell yuh where they are."

"What?" bellowed Meade. He gave the man a last shake before releasing him. "What yuh done with 'em?"

Puffing and blowing like a walrus, Trench readjusted his clothes and shot the old man a venomous glance.

"They moved over to the dance hall this mornin'," he said. "They're stayin' with Belle Howard."

"Yuh turned 'em out!" shouted Meade, clenching his mighty fist. "I ought to pistol-whip yuh!"

"No!" shouted Trench in turn. "I offered to let 'em stay here free, but they wouldn't. The girl is workin' at the dance hall."

"Yuh let womenfolks of mine do a thing like that?" The old man's rage was majestic. "Why, yuh dirty coyote! Get behind that desk counter and register them women in the best rooms in this place—right now! I'm goin' after 'em, and yuh better have the finest rooms in this rat-trap ready by the time I get back."

"Of course," agreed Trench. He backed toward the desk and the wide-eyed clerk.

Abe Meade whirled and raged out of the hotel. Trench stared after him, his face distorted with rage.

"Never mind the register," he snarled at the clerk. "That old devil has raised his last rumpus. He ain't the king of Creation he thinks he is. Start gatherin' together the men who were here last night."

"Yuh mean—yuh're goin' to raise another lynch mob?" stammered the clerk, aghast.

"Yuh heard what I said," snarled Trench. "The whole town's against that old hellion."

Unaware of the train of powder he had laid in his wake, Abe Meade strode fiercely along the street and shouldered his way into Faro Thorpe's saloon. He glared at the night crowd, then, shaking his head like an angry bull, he headed for the archway to the dance hall.

Suddenly silent men recognized him and moved out of his way, staring after him fearfully. As though at a signal, Faro Thorpe appeared. He advanced from the rear of the saloon and met the old rancher near the foot of the stairs at the archway.

"Good evening, Mr. Meade," he said quietly, but his voice cut like a knife through the place. "Something I can do for you?"

"Yes," roared Abe Meade savagely. "What do yuh mean by bringin' my womenfolks to a place like this? Where are they? Trot 'em out quick before I wreck this lowdown outfit!"

"Calm down, Mr. Meade," Thorpe said evenly, but his eyes narrowed and glittered. "You don't need to shout. No harm has come to the Burke women. They came here of their own free will."

"Faro Thorpe," thundered the old hellion, "I'll give yuh just one minute to produce Mary and Sally Burke!"

Belle Howard came running from the dance floor, her eyes alive with anxiety. Everybody waited tensely for the fireworks they were sure would explode. But Faro Thorpe surprised them.

"Certainly, Mr. Meade," he said softly, a smile touching his thin lips. "I have been expecting you. The ladies are upstairs in Miss Howard's rooms. Belle, will you please conduct Mr. Meade to them? The 'no gentlemen above stairs' rule does not apply in this case."

"Everything's all right, Abe," said Belle Howard soothingly as she took the old man's arm. "Come with me."

"Lead the way," said the old man gruffly. "I reckon mebbe I'm a mite too touchy."

The mistress of the dance hall smiled and led the way up the steps. Abe Meade shook himself like a quieting wolfhound and followed.

Faro Thorpe stood there for a long minute, his hand on the newel post of the stairs which ran up along the partition wall. Then he smiled and jerked his head at several men standing along the bar. As he started lightly up the steps, the gun-hung men filed over from the bar and took up stations at the foot of the stairs. . . .

HENRY MAXWELL sat at his desk in the mine office, thinking deeply. Under the glow of the shaded lamp his ruddy face

seemed a fiery red. However, the manager of the borax mines was not exactly in a stew. He was more in a brown study.

Save for the desk lamp the office was dark, and Maxwell was there alone. Dimly he heard men running and shouting on the street, but even this did not arouse him, for he was thinking intently about the matter that Wayne Morgan had brought to his attention.

It was considerably past the time he had promised to meet Morgan here, but he knew that the failure could well have been his own fault. He had spent nearly an hour looking for Hardwick after leaving Morgan with Belle Howard at the dance hall. Doubtless Morgan had given him up and turned his attention elsewhere.

Being a man of a great deal of discernment, Maxwell was reflecting deeply on a number of puzzling factors. Things were beginning to crowd up, and he knew he must make some decisive moves—and quickly.

The creaking open of the rear door brought him to himself with a start, and he reached for his gun.

"Don't pull it, Maxwell!" a harsh, gruff voice warned him.

"Who are you?" snapped the mine manager, peering into the dark. "What do you want?"

"Who I am don't matter," said the gruff voice. "I want to have a little palaver with yuh. Just set still and put yore hands on the desk."

Slowly, reluctantly Maxwell obeyed, his eyes staring to make out in the dimness the man who approached. But he was doomed to disappointment. There was no chance of recognizing the masked and black-cloaked figure that came within the circle of lamplight and faced him across the desk.

"Who are you?" demanded Maxwell again, his voice hoarse in spite of himself.

The standing man merely surveyed him silently, and Maxwell answered his own question.

"You are the Masked Rider!" he ejaculated. "No! It isn't possible. The Masked Rider hasn't been reported in this part of the country."

"Nevertheless, I am here," answered the Masked Rider sternly. "There's to be an accountin' in Sand Wells tonight."

"I'm not answerable to you," said Maxwell, in quick defense. "I'm not guilty of anything."

"Yuh're guilty of bein' a plumb big fool, Henry Maxwell," accused the Masked Rider. "Because of yore drivin' ambition to force a right-of-way through Abraham Meade's land yuh're responsible for all the trouble that's brewin' here on this range."

"I am not!" protested Maxwell, but there was a note of doubt in his voice. "Who accuses me? That drifter Morgan?"

"Yuh accuse yoreself, Maxwell. Yuh've brought every bit of pressure to bear that yuh could, tryin' to force Meade to sell yuh a strip of land. When he refused and tried to lease yuh a right-of-way at what yuh thought was an outrageous price, yuh tried to get his land condemned by the Governor of this Territory."

"What's wrong with that?" defended the mine manager. "It is only good business, and a railroad spur means a lot to everybody in this section. Why should one man be allowed to stand in the way?"

"Why? Because that man didn't have the right to sell yuh any of his land. He was tryin' to deal with yuh the only way he knew how."

"I'd have paid him his price for the land, but not for just a leased right-of-way. Why couldn't he sell? I'll tell yuh why. Because he's a hard-headed, stubborn old miser trying to hold up the Goddard Company for all he could get. He simply overmatched himself this time."

"Maxwell," said the Masked Rider, shaking his head pityingly, "yuh're a fool. Yuh've shore set a train of far-reaching events in action. Other things outside of yore feud with Meade have been brought into it all by yore loggerhead tactics. Have yuh figgered at all that a third party might be usin' yuh for his own selfish ends?"

"Who?" demanded Maxwell tersely.

THE Masked Rider shook his head, reading Maxwell's mind.

"Not John Anderson," he said. "You and Anderson are both bein' used as tools and scapegoats by this other man I mean. Because you two have the plainest reasons to hate Abraham Meade yuh're bein' led to the slaughter like lambs. Men in yore pay, like Hardwick, and men in Anderson's pay are workin' for yore enemy, pilin' up evidence against yuh, and yuh set still and let matters go as far as murder."

"That's a lie!" cried Maxwell hotly. "I have no dealings of any kind with Anderson or anybody else."

"Don't forget yore freighter, Hardwick, who's layin' dead over at Snodgrass' place right now. Or don't yuh believe the evidence against Hardwick?"

"Hardwick dead? No wonder I couldn't find him. Who killed him?"

"The drifter yuh called Morgan—and just in time to save Anderson's life. And now Morgan is bein' hunted by Marshal Quigley for this killin'. Morgan can't either help or hinder yuh now."

"Who is this man who uses me for a tool?" demanded Maxwell in a grating voice, his

hands clenching and unclenching.

"His name is Faro Thorpe," said the Masked Rider.

"Thorpe? I can't believe it! What has Thorpe to gain?"

"Yuh'll soon see. Right this minute he has Abe Meade cornered upstairs over the Palace Dance Hall where likely he is rushin' through the deal he has been aimin' at ever since Meade filed on the mineral rights of Eagle Pass to block yore condemnation move."

"Can you prove this?" asked Maxwell, his voice full of menace.

"Yuh're not the only man who wants proof," said the Masked Rider. "Come with me. The other man is out in the alley."

"Who is he?" demanded Maxwell.

"John Anderson."

"Lead the way," said Maxwell. He got grimly to his feet.

CHAPTER XIV

Thorpe Plays His Ace

JUST behind the mine office two men were standing in the alley, one of them easily discernible because of his white garb.

"Hawk?" called the Masked Rider softly. "Did yuh find him?"

"Here I am, Masked Rider," spoke up John Anderson for himself.

"Did yuh tell Anderson what Joe Blake is doin', Hawk?" went on the Masked Rider.

"Yes, Senor," replied the Indian. "But he does not like to believe."

"I just can't believe Blake has throwed in with Thorpe thisaway," declared Anderson. "I ain't yet convinced that Thorpe is a skunk, in spite of what that Morgan feller told me."

"Yuh'd have known by this time, if Hardwick and Blake hadn't killed the wrong man yesterday mornin'."

"If that's so, why won't Thorpe kill Meade tonight?"

"He may aim to, but the set-up is different now. Now Meade has relatives who'll inherit if he dies. When he ordered Meade's death yesterday, Thorpe didn't know this. But we waste time talkin'. Hawk, yore job now is to find Marshal Quigley and bring him to the dance hall pronto."

"Bueno, Senor," said the Indian, and faded swiftly into the night.

"What's all that shouting on the main street?" asked Maxwell, suddenly aware of the noise and excitement.

"Sam Trench is lettin' everybody know that Abe Meade has come to town," the Masked Rider said grimly. "It may be a question of who gets to Meade first."

Maxwell groaned suddenly. "Belle Howard!" he exclaimed. "Belle took the two Burke women over to the Palace. Is she in cahoots with Faro Thorpe?"

"Belle Howard is just another of Thorpe's tools," said the Masked Rider, as kindly as he could in his gruff voice. "Things just happened to work out this way. She's no more to blame than anybody else. Now be quiet as we get to the back end of the dance hall. I must warn yuh both that this business is plumb dangerous. I'll try to protect yuh, but I can't guarantee yore safety."

"If we ain't safe, then what yuh claim is true," said Anderson sagely. "In that case, I can stand on my own hind feet and bust a few caps, and to thunder with Marshal Quigley."

"Just show me proof," breathed Maxwell. "I'll settle with Meade later."

As silently as stalking Indians the trio made their way along the black alley and neared the darkened rear of the dance hall and saloon. There was no moon, and a cloudy overcast made the starshine negligible. As they passed a vacant lot they could see men gathering in the front street, shouting and looking fierce under the flickering torches some of them carried. Several had ropes. They were snake-dancing and singing, "Hang Abe Meade to a sycamore tree," to the tune of "John Brown's Body."

"Say, them rannies mean business," muttered Anderson. "I should of finished Sam Trench last night when he first started this. What's his stake in this game, anyway, Masked Rider?"

"Faro Thorpe couldn't do it all alone," said the Masked Rider succinctly. "Soft now. Here we are."

"What's your plan?" asked Maxwell heavily.

"We're goin' in and surprise Thorpe. . . Careful. The back door is prob'ly guarded."

They moved on like phantoms in the dark. Then, just as they reached the corner of the building, Maxwell's foot clicked against a tin can. Instantly there was a startled movement at the door.

"Who's there?" a man's voice called tersely.

When there was no answer, he called again.

"Speak quick, or I'll shoot."

"Shoot and be hanged!" cried Maxwell savagely, and launched himself forward in a lumbering charge.

"Fool!" grated the Masked Rider angrily, leaping after him.

A tongue of orange flame lanced the night as the guard's gun roared once, then again. In the flashes the guard in cowboy attire and the burly, charging Maxwell were outlined.

Then the guard, having located his attacker, leveled his gun to fire pointblank in Maxwell's face.

He never pulled the trigger. The Masked Rider leaped to one side to get around Maxwell and fired once. The guard let out a monstrous grunt, indication that he had just taken a full breath to yell an alarm, and crashed to the ground.

MAXWELL almost fell over him. Recovering, he struck a match. The face of Joe Blake, PDQ rider, was revealed staring sightlessly up at the shrouded heavens.

"Blake!" growled Anderson. "I guess yuh called the turn, Masked Rider."

The Masked Rider knelt beside the body and ripped open the shirt. He muttered his intense satisfaction as he revealed something strapped around the dead man's waist—a snakeskin money belt.

"Stanley Burke's money-belt, I reckon yuh'll find," he said swiftly. "Proof enough that Blake was the other killer who trapped Burke."

"Say, I bet that's what Morgan was lookin' for on Hardwick!" exclaimed Anderson.

"Mebbe," said the Masked Rider. "At least, here's the first part of yore proof."

"Let's go," said Maxwell, lurching to his feet as the match went out.

He fell against the door, fumbled for the latch, then flung the barrier wide open.

A flood of soft lamplight yellowed the opening, and the two men behind him could see Maxwell swaying slightly in the doorway. Blood was running down his left arm and dripping to the threshold from his fingertips.

"Maxwell!" jerked out Anderson. "He's been hit!"

"Only a flesh wound in the arm," said Maxwell. Clenching his left hand he raised the arm to show that he could still use it. "Come on!"

Like a maddened bull that could not be swerved aside, he strode grimly toward the dance hall archway, dripping blood every step of the way.

Just as the Masked Rider and Anderson leaped after him there came a crescendo of galloping hoofs out in the front street. The shouts of angry men mingled with the bellowing of gun shots.

Nobody was in the rear of the dance hall, all having rushed toward the front to watch the excitement on the street. So the trio of determined men almost reached the archway before they were discovered.

One of the six men guarding the foot of the stairs glanced around and saw them. He let out a wild yell of surprise and consternation.

"The Masked Rider!" he shouted, and began firing feverishly.

In an instant the place was filled with the roaring of six-guns and the acrid odor of blinding gunsmoke. Two of the stair defenders fell before the accurate fire of the Masked Rider and Anderson. The others, panic-stricken by the sight of that tall, black-robed avenger, flanked by two grim-looking men with blazing guns, broke and ran through the saloon.

One of them tried to race up the stairs to warn Faro Thorpe, and Maxwell lunged after him. Catching him half-way up the steps, the berserk mine manager plucked him off the stairs with his right hand like a fly and dropped him over the railing to the floor below.

The Masked Rider would have preferred to clean out the saloon before penetrating further into the lion's lair. It was never safe to leave armed enemies on your back-trail. But Maxwell, going heavily on, was forcing the issue. So, after a quick glance through the smoke-filled and rapidly emptying saloon, the Masked Rider took the stairs three at a time.

"Guard the stairs!" he yelled at Anderson.

But the redhead only laughed derisively and plunged up the steps in his wake.

Serenely unaware of the fighting going on below, Faro Thorpe faced Abraham Meade in Belle Howard's living room. Flanking the saloon owner were a pair of muscular housemen, both armed with sawed-off shotguns. Over against one wall Belle Howard stood with her arms about Sally Burke and the trembling mother. Meade was like a magnificent stag at bay.

"What in blazes yuh mean by this armed intrusion, Thorpe?" bellowed the irate old man.

"Time is pressing, Meade," said the gambler coolly. "For you, not for me. Were you crazy enough to think you could charge into my place like a bull in a china shop? You bulldoze other people, Meade, but not Faro Thorpe."

"What's the idea of all this?" demanded Meade. "I'm takin' my womenfolks and gettin' out of here right now."

"No, you're not," said Thorpe silkily. "I've a little business matter to transact with you first. I have here"—he drew a folded paper from his inside pocket—"an agreement made between you and the late George Anderson. It has been endorsed over to me. You doubtless recall the terms of it."

THE old rancher quieted down, perhaps sensing what was to come. He glared at the gambler and waited.

"I'll refresh your mind," Thorpe went on easily. "Upon the payment of five thousand dollars, tendered with this document, you are to surrender the Old Anchor ranch, lock,

stock and barrel. Here is the paper. And here is five thousand dollars in gold."

He produced a heavy buckskin bag that had dangled at his waist, and tossed it onto the table beside the old ranchman.

"That deal was made with the Anderson family," said Abe Meade harshly. "Not with a skunk like you."

"Calling names won't help your predicament," warned Thorpe, unruffled. "You'll deal with me because this paper is endorsed to me, and because I have the money. You will find a quitclaim deed to the ranch, properly made out, on that table. Sit down and sign it."

"I'll see yuh in perdition first!" roared the old man.

"Oh, Faro, you crazy fool!" Belle Howard cried. "You shouldn't be horning in on—"

"You shut up and stay out of this!" Thorpe cut her off curtly. "Listen, you old bull," he went on to Meade, "this paper is legal, and you know I can take it to any court and whip you on it. But you haven't got time. You had no business coming to town at all. The whole countryside is up in arms against you. The only way you can save your neck is to remove yourself. The first thing I shall do will be to sell the Goddard Company a spur right-of-way at a nominal price through Eagle Pass. If yuh're smart, you'll take this money and those two women and hightail out of this country."

"No!" refused Meade hoarsely. "I won't do it. Where's John Anderson?"

"Abe! Abe!" appealed Mary Burke apprehensively. "Don't refuse if it's on account of Sally and me. Don't worry about us."

Meade shot a kindly glance at her, then looked back at Thorpe.

"Lemme see that paper," he said craftily.

"I'll hold it," said Thorpe significantly. "You can see its authenticity and endorsement without handling it."

"All right," capitulated the old man, after squinting at the agreement. "I'll sign. Glad to get shut of the danged old place, anyhow."

He sat down heavily at the table and ran his eyes over the quitclaim deed. Suddenly he jumped up with a renewed roaring.

"This here thing includes assignment to all mineral rights!" he shouted.

"Exactly," agreed Thorpe pleasantly. "As if you didn't know the gold mine is what I'm after."

"Well, yuh'll never get it," said Abe Meade grimly.

Thorpe walked over to the nearest window and threw it open. He flung out his arm with a sweep to indicate the wave of sound below.

"Hear that?" he asked. "Hear the shouts and shots? It isn't for the Fourth of July, you know."

"Wh-what is it?" cried Sally Burke fearfully.

"A mob of angry citizens," explained Thorpe, shrugging. "They want to lynch Abe Meade. All I have to do is invite them in to take him. You know what that means, Meade. If you don't want your neck stretched and these two kinswomen of yours thrown to that mob, you'll waste no more time. Sign that quitclaim!"

For one of the few times in his cantankerous life Abe Meade turned pale as he listened to the angry mob down in the street.

"Who's incitin' that bunch of crazy fools?" he demanded.

"Not that it makes any difference," answered Thorpe, "but it is Sam Trench. He hates you cordially."

"I begin to understand," said Abe Meade bitterly. "You and Trench and Anderson are in cahoots to rob me. And that's the thanks I get for holdin' the Old Anchor together all in one piece."

"You should talk of robbery," said Thorpe coldly. "After the fleecing you gave George Anderson. Running up a big bill against him for finding a gold mine and then not giving him his mine when you did find it."

"All right," said Meade heavily. "I'll sign. You guarantee to get me and my womenfolks to safety?"

"I'll let you out the back door and try to stop the mob," promised Thorpe. "I don't want to see anybody hurt."

"Gimme a pen," said Abe Meade grimly.

There was a tremendous crash as a pair of bodies hurled themselves against the hall door. The barrier splintered inward as Maxwell, bloody and angry-eyed, stumbled across the threshold amid the wreckage of the door. A tall man in black who wore a mask leaped over his body and landed in the room in a gun-fighting crouch.

"Don't sign anything, Meade!" he shouted. "This man Thorpe is the devil who had Stanley Burke killed!"

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed Abe Meade.

CHAPTER XV

Not Enough Women

FARO THORPE whirled like a striking snake as he heard the door crashed in, his hands darting beneath his coat and coming out with a pair of .38 six-shooters. The two men with the sawed-off shotguns threw them up.

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed the gambler, his face

blanching. Slowly he began backing toward the table. "Gun that outlaw down!" he yelled.

Gun thunder broke loose in the room. A huge chunk of ceiling and one side of the wall by the door were torn away as the two murderous shotguns belched fire and buckshot. But the Masked Rider remained unscathed save for a couple of small shot that stung one arm. He had fired first, blasting the nearer shotgun artist to his problematical reward just before the fellow pulled the trigger. Anderson got the second man shooting in unison with the Masked Rider.

Quick as a flash, Abe Meade grappled with Faro Thorpe before the gambler could level down on him and use him for a shield. But Thorpe was every bit as wily and tough as he was reputed to be. He raised one gun in a lightning move and brought the barrel down on the old hellion's head in a vicious blow. Abe Meade shuddered and, still clawing blindly at his assailant, crashed to the floor like a felled oak tree.

The women screamed in terror. The Masked Rider dodged out of the gunsmoke to snap a shot at Thorpe, but Maxwell got in his way. Scrambling up from the floor, the mine manager lunged across the room at Thorpe like a maniac. The Masked Rider was forced to hold his fire.

Leaping backward out of the charging Maxwell's way, Thorpe managed to get in one shot which staggered his antagonist but failed to stop him. Alarmed, Thorpe stepped back again, and his leg struck against the window sill just as Maxwell reached him. Lunging into the gambler, Maxwell finished the job of knocking Thorpe off-balance.

Clawing frantically at the sides of the open window, Thorpe toppled backward out of the opening. He screamed hoarsely once before he crashed to the sidewalk.

The fight was over—ended. So were Thorpe's ambitions.

Maxwell stood there for a moment, staring stupidly out of the window. Then he turned around to make an apologetic gesture at the Masked Rider, and fell forward unconscious. The next moment it seemed to the Masked Rider that the room overflowed with women.

Belle Howard flung herself down beside Maxwell, sobbing, anxiously exploring with her hands to see how badly the mine manager was hit. Mary Burke was down on the floor, cradling Abe Meade's bloody head in her lap. Sally was laughing and crying hysterically in John Anderson's arms.

The Masked Rider turned helplessly toward the smashed door just as Blue Hawk came in at the head of a strange procession. Following the Indian were Marshal Quigley, Eben Snodgrass and Limpy Logan. Behind Logan came two grim-faced Texas cowboys, dragging a frightened and scratched and torn Sam Trench between them.

"Senor!" cried the Indian happily. "You are safe."

"But I wouldn't have been if there'd been one more woman," declared the Masked Rider.

"Holy mackerel!" exclaimed the little undertaker in distress. "Just look at the corpses! I better get Doc Stamms. I wish that Morgan feller would come back. I'd hire him after all."

"Is Abe Meade—dead?" demanded Limpy Logan anxiously. "Gabe! Bronc! Get that polecat ready to string up!"

"Hold on, men," said the Masked Rider. "Yore boss is all right. And I hope Maxwell is."

"We come a-roarin' to town," explained Limpy, "as soon as I could round up the help. We found this skunk out in the street tryin' to work up a lynch mob against Abe. We broke it up, sort of."

"With my help," added Marshal Quigley. "Where is Faro Thorpe?"

"Yuh just missed him, lawman," replied the Masked Rider. "He fell out the window."

PROMPTLY Quigley and Gabe Harper ran out to investigate. Sam Trench dropped to his knees and began pleading with the Masked Rider to save his life. Order was gradually restored while Blue Hawk deftly aided in reviving Meade and Maxwell. When the two wounded men were seen to be out of danger the Masked Rider spoke.

"Looks like I ain't needed here any longer, folks," he said. "I reckon yuh can fit all the details of this business together now. Meade, the men who killed yore cousin are all three dead. Anderson, I figger yuh was cheated out of that agreement by Thorpe. Yuh'd best take it now and destroy it. Yuh won't want to buy the Old Anchor back, even if yuh had the five thousand right in hand—not now that yuh seem to be plannin' on marryin' into it."

"Yuh're plumb right, Masked Rider," Anderson agreed heartily. "I'll tear it up."

"Which deed will make you free, Meade, to deal with Maxwell and sell him a strip of land for his right-of-way," went on the Masked Rider. "As for you, Maxwell, since yuh know Meade is tryin' to raise money to help the Burke family, yuh might be a little more generous in your terms."

"You bet I will," said Maxwell weakly. "As soon as I get on my feet, I'll meet you half-way, Abe. So that's the reason you wouldn't sell the company a strip through the Old Anchor? You were holding it intact in strict accord with your agreement with Anderson's father. But if you needed money to help the Burkes, why didn't you

start developing your gold mine?"

Abe Meade seemed not to hear. He looked around at the group. He had the appearance of a patriarch with his swathed head, bandaged in strips torn from Mary Burke's underskirt.

There was a twinkle in his gimlet eyes as he patted the widow's thin hands.

"I don't reckon we'll need money to send yuh to Colorado for yore health, Mary," he said. "New Mexico's high and dry enough to make yuh well. And I got a sun-scorcher of a ranch up near the desert where yuh can bake good. And Johnnie, I reckon I sort of misjudged yuh."

"I misjudged you mebbe," Anderson said soberly. "If so, I'm plumb sorry, and I'll try to make up for it. I'm sorry about lettin' Thorpe worm that agreement out of me. I might of knowed he was after yore gold mine."

"You folks can sweat the rest of the details out of Sam Trench here in exchange for his life," suggested the Masked Rider.

Marshal Quigley returned at this time.

"Yep," he said, tugging at his sagging mustache, "Thorpe's dead. He broke his neck. Now just what is all this ruction? I can't allow such wholesale slaughter goin' on in my town."

"It's all settled, Marshal," the Masked Rider told him.

"All but one thing," said Abe Meade. "I ain't wantin' folks now or ever to think I hornswoggled George Anderson out of that land, after I'd found gold on it. I'd a-swore on a stack of Bibles they wasn't none, and only just recent run onto it. Yuh could have knocked me down with a feather. But even so, it wasn't doin' me any good, since I'd mebbe had to sign over most of it to get dinero to work it, 'cept I could file a claim, after I'd had an assay made, so's I could keep the ranch intact and mebbe make Maxwell come through with a decent deal. Figgered to get the money to work it later."

"Mebbe yuh can make a decent deal with Maxwell right now," suggested the Masked Rider. "Maxwell might like to do some kind of minin' than for borax, and he's got the money."

"Yes," Maxwell said, and looked up at the woman who was holding his head in her lap. "And perhaps Belle would like to come in, too."

"Shore—shore!" boomed Meade, in something like his old tones, and all were so suddenly interested that they did not notice the Masked Rider as he signaled the Indian and moved toward the door.

As the two disappeared through the door, headed for the untrammeled range, the last they heard was Snodgrass complaining in his sad voice:

"Well, I got to work all night. Yuh say there's another corpse at the back door, Matt? You wouldn't want a temp'rary job, would yuh?"

And Marshal Quigley's firm reply:

"Nope. I got me a job lookin' for that Morgan feller. . . ."

Later that night, far out on the eastern trail, the Masked Rider and his faithful companion jogged along on their way to their canyon hide-out to pack their belonging and travel onward.

"Confound it!" exclaimed the Masked Rider impatiently as a sudden thought struck him.

"What is it, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk quickly. "You forget something?"

"Yuh bet I did," growled the Masked Rider in the voice of Wayne Morgan. "I never did get that haircut!"

Both were laughing heartily as the great black stallion and the strong-limbed gray galloped along the trail, sweeping their riders onward to the next adventure.

Next Issue's Novel: MONTEZUMA'S GOLD, by CHUCK MARTIN

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Adv.

Pa quits us on the fly, with that snake hooked to the seat of his pants

PA, HE JEST HATES RATTLERS!

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

A hiccuping practical joker gets his come-uppance!

HIS face is sitting there on that scrawny neck of his and grinning at me when my eyelids flutter open. There's devilment seeping out of "Pa" Watson's eyes. The old scogie looks as sheepish as a pig-killing coyote. He was just about to play one of his practical jokes on me.

"I didn't aim for you to wake up for a while, Sorry," Pa Watson says to me, looking disappointed. "I aimed to get you and Goober both. Oh, well, one's better'n none!"

Pa pours the sand out of my boot and walks out into the yard. He's got an old hearth shovel in his hand. He scoops up a shovelful of blistering sand and walks back to the gallery.

"Be quiet!" Pa cautions, winking.

The old dickens takes Goober Telk's boot and pours that hot sand in it. Pa smiles and gurgles down in his throat like a berserk fiend. He winks at me again, then lays a gentle hand on Goober.

"Time to hit the saddle, boys!" Pa yells. "Git up, Goober! Le's go!"

Goober pried open sleepy eyes and squints at the bright mid-day light.

"Heck fire!" Pa shouts to draw Goober's attention. "Look at that blasted gelding tryin' to break out of the lot! Hurry up, boys! I need some help!"

Goober can't see the lot, but he thinks sure enough that the gelding is trying to break out. So Goober grabs his boots and shoves a foot down the right one while he's scrambling onto his feet and reaching for his hat.

When Goober's foot hits that scalding sand, he looks surprised for a second. But it don't last more than a second. He hasn't got time to be surprised in a case like that.

"Howlin' buzzards!" Goober shrieks.

He starts kicking and jumping and trying to pull that boot off. He's making right pert noises out of his mouth, too.

When the boot's finally in his right hand, Goober holds up the sole of his foot and looks at it close.

"I'd a sworn it was burnt to a crisp frazzle!" he gasps.

Then Goober pours the sand out of his boot. He looks around for Pa. But the old man had eased off toward the corral. Pa gets aboard his pony now, looking back and grinning wide. He busts out in a rib-jarring laugh as he bogs his spurs. His sorrel leads a curl of dust off toward the Bowl Hills.

"Why, you old scallawag!" Goober hollers out after him. "I'll get it back on you if it takes me a thousand years!"

"He aimed to get you an' me both," I remarks. "But I woke up."

"Old buzzard!" Goober snaps. "If he wasn't so dad-burned good-natured and easy on us, I'd be tempted to throw a slug in his chest at times like these!"

GOOBER goes and bathes his foot in cold water. Then we hit leather. We've got some right smart fence work to do over in the Bowl Hills section, and we aim to see that Pa helps us.

Pa, he's the ramrod of the Pack Sand Ranch. All the living kin that he knows of is his son, Slo, who lives with us on the Pack Sand. Me and Goober and Pa takes care of the ranch. Slo keeps the house and cooking going. Slo wouldn't be any account as a ranch hand nohow. He don't move mor'n once every five minutes, and just one joint at a time then.

Me and Goober Telk has been working on the Pack Sand for going on nine years now. We threaten to quit every three weeks on account of Pa's pranks. But he's so blamed good to us other ways that we just can't pull stakes. Too, the old Pack Sand would go down fast if me and Goober wasn't around to make Pa work. He'd heap rather play pranks than work, Pa had.

"Don't see how he ever got hold of a ranch, even like this'un, prankin' the way he does," Goober wonders out loud as we ride.

"He used to be a night-'n-dayer in his younger life," I tell the lanky poke. "After his wife died, they say he sort of let up. Didn't have nobody to pervide for but Slo, and Slo is enough to disgust the spunk out of anybody."

"Yeah," Goober agrees. "All Slo can do is say 'Pa, yer workin' me too hard' and 'I'm a-comin', Pa!' Seem like Pa plumb liked it from the start, tho."

"Pa likes anything," I tell Goober. "He's just a plumb-good, old rapscallion. I wouldn't work for nobody else for twice the wages."

"Me neither," Goober says. He wiggles his sand-burned right foot then, and adds, "I reckon."

When we hit the Bowl Hills fence-line, we see Pa leaning back against a tree, his mouth open and his tongue lolling out. He hasn't hit a lick of work yet. There's something wrong with him.

"He's got the he-cups again," Goober tells me, scowling. "I been worryin' a little lately 'bout them danged he-cups. It just ain't natural for a man to he-cup like Pa does when it hits him."

"Laughin' over that joke brought on a dose," I reason. "Looks like they are gettin' worse 'stead of better."

"Slo threatened to ride over and get a doctor this evenin'," Goober informs, spurring forward into a jog trot. "I hope he does."

Pa has sure 'nuf got a case of them this time. I've heard of a heap of silly things in my life, but this is the first time I ever sat on my heels and watched a full grown man nearly he-cup his stuffing out. He jolts all over, gets to going faster, and plumb gags at times.

It has got to where he has one or two spells every day. They're getting longer and longer. And these last few have looked right dangerous. We try to get Pa to crawl his nag, ride in to Inkball, and see if old Doc Fencer can do anything about it.

"Naw," Pa says slow. "I don't aim to mess with no doctor. Ain't never been to one yet that didn't end up with cuttin' something out of me, and ownin' half my savin's to pay for hit." Pa looks mad out of his eyes. "I'll jest take my tobacco cure."

Pa reaches in his hind pocket, brings out his twist-plug, and gnaws off a wad.

"One swaller'll quiet 'er a little," Pa allows.

Me and Goober shudders a little and feel weak around the upper lip just thinking about it.

Pa lays there in the shade another hour—then he comes out and helps us fix fence. He's still got his hiccups, though. They last him till slap dark.

We ride in that night, and Goober asks Slo about the doctor. Slo allows as how he aimed to ride in after the Doc but felt his dander give out after washing the dishes.

Pa just has a light case of them hiccups the next morning, so we figure he's getting better.

About four o'clock in the evening, we head out for Cottonwood Creek on a little fishing trip to celebrate winding up our fence work over in the Bowl Hills. Pa and Goober and me mortally like to angle for catfish over there in Cottonwood Creek.

We've got the lines out and are sitting there under a big willow, watching the full moon lace through the shimmering leaves.

"Might-nigh forgot, Goober," Pa says. "Found something this evenin' while lookin' for bait, that I want you to see."

Pa gets up and walks over behind a big cottonwood tree. Goober is lying there relaxed, smoking a quirly, and not paying much attention to what's going on. A man can reckon as how he'd be right surprised and jolted-like to find a rattlesnake between his legs all of a sudden. The snake's dead, of course, but Goober don't know it. Yet a throwed snake don't act dead for one or two seconds. This one even seemed to shake his rattlers like he aimed to take out a hunk of anybody near him.

WELL, Goober don't wait to mull the thing over in his mind. He spraddles out his legs, yells like a Comanche jabbed with a red-hot rod. It seems like he rises straight up for six feet without any straining at all. He's backed clean over the campfire before the lanky poke sees the snake's not following him.

Goober's just naturally jumpy over snakes. He don't never aim to associate with one if he can help it. He looks pretty plegged when he finds out the snake's dead. Pa's over there, leaning against that cottonwood tree, whooping and laughing and beating the tree trunk with the palm of his right hand.

Pa gets a heap of fun out of a joke like that.

The tall poke comes and sits down after I've drug the snake off with a stick. He smiles sheepish.

"All right, you old devil," he says to Pa. "Yours is comin'."

We sit around a while longer, listening to the night birds cry, and the funny little sounds the creek makes as it gurgles over the rocky shoals.

Then we turn in. We sleep full-dressed, using our saddle blankets for a bed. It looks to me like there's a glint in Pa's eyes as he lays down and knocks out his pipe, but I think maybe it's that tricky glimmer of the dying fire.

I lay there for a while, watching clouds slide across the moon, hearing a lonesome dogie bawl, and waiting for the cry of a prowling coyote. I'm plumb happy right now. I don't see how folks can live in towns, sleep in soft beds, and wear Sunday clothes all the time, when they could be out on the range nights like this, smelling clean air, and listening to the laughing owls quarreling down in the lower draw.

Then I drop off. Goober is already snoring.

I wake up dreaming that a lobo wolf has a death-hold on my left shoulder. I reach up to get him by the neck when I see Pa bending down over me.

"Easy, Sorry!" he whispers. Pa's smiling like a jackass eating briars. "You ain't as scared of snakes as Goober is. So get up and watch. You're in my way."

I yawn, sit up and wipe the sleep out of the corners of my eyes. I don't say nothing, figuring that Pa is old enough to bug his own beard. He ought to know if this one is good enough to wake me up over.

"Couldn't sleep nohow," Pa informs. "Blasted he-cups has got me ag'in."

"Laughin'll make 'em worse," I inform him.

But Pa don't pay me no mind.

"Only way I can keep from goin' loco when I get the he-cups," he enlightens, "is to work out a little joke. If it makes 'em worse, well, I'd rather die laughing than any other way."

That Pa, he's a mortal mess if ever I saw one.

I sit there blinking my eyes and rolling a quirly, while Pa goes over and drags out that dead rattler that I threw away. The snake's head is not hurt a bit. It looks plumb natural there in the moonlight. Pa bends over and rakes the good ends of our campfire sticks back on the coals.

"Want a little light so that rattler's eyes'll glitter," Pa explains.

He takes the snake and props its mouth open with a short stick. It looks just as natural, that snake does. A man wouldn't need much imagination after looking at a thing like that, to figure the big rattler is fixing to eat him, blood raw. It's enough to scare the daylights out of a man not uncommonly scared of snakes, much less a poke with reptile-rash like Goober.

Pa coils the snake up now and lays it on the saddle blanket beside Goober. But he's not satisfied with this. Pa's got to make 'er complete. He takes an old mud-stained fishing cord, cuts a three-yard length off, and ties one end around where the rattler's neck ought to be. Pa is careful as he ties the other end around Goober's belt. Pa has cut the line just long enough so that the snake will appear to have its head up, ready to strike, as it is dragged along behind the tall poke.

Now that things are ready, Pa takes his knife and cuts off the snake's rattlers. All this

time he's grinning and chuckling and winking at me. He's still hiccuping too. But he don't mind that now.

Looking at me with a tight smile on his face, Pa takes the rattlers and holds them within two inches of Goober's ear. He shakes the blamed things so they give off a fair resemblance to a diamond-back's mad buzz.

It causes Goober to quit snoring. Pa shakes them again. This time, the tall poke stirs uneasily and groans a little like maybe he's dreaming about something he don't hanker to meet up with.

Goober rolls over on the third buzz, and he lays square up against that rattler. Pa hits it good and proper then. He nudges Goober in the ribs a couple of times like a snake trying to strike through his clothes. Then Pa lays down quick.

I CAN see Goober's eyes flutter open now. The moonlight is on his face pretty bright. I can even see the expression in his eyes, and the way he jerks stiff when he feels something under him. There's a strong suspicion in the poke's mind that he's heard a rattler. That soft thing he's lying against don't disqualify his belief none.

Goober shuffles to the side quickly. He turns then and stares into the open mouth of the rattler. That stick has the reptile's jaws wide open. It looks like the snake is just about to bite out a hunk of cowpoke.

Goober don't see that stick in the snake's mouth. He's not looking for such small details. It's just one thought in the poke's mind right now. He's been lying there for no telling how long, half on a big rattler.

It don't surprise us, of course, when Goober springs up from there like a skinned tomcat. This move just makes matters worse, though. It takes up the slack in that fishing cord, and causes the rattler to jump, sort of mad-like, at the scared poke.

That's all Pa needs.

Goober hollers pretty loud and backs across Pa before he knows what he's doing. Pa trips him up, of course, but Goober don't stay down long. He's up hollering some more and shouting advice.

"Leaping catfish!" Goober yells. "Whole place is full o' rattlers! Look out!"

The lanky poke quits camp then. He looks back just once. That's enough. Goober sees that snake following him, and he lets go a burst of speed that makes his ordinary level-best running gait look sick.

Pa Watson rises up off his blanket and laughs deep down in his innards. I lean on an elbow and listen to Goober clear a trail out through that brushy creek-bottom. It sounds a good bit like a wild cattle stampede through the haw thickets, that race. The tall poke is disfiguring the ground with his feet, rattling the brush and hollering about every twenty yards. We hear water splash and everything's quiet.

"He hit the bluff hole," Pa stops laughing long enough to say. "Water's deep there, so it won't hurt him none."

Then the old devil goes on with his mighty-nigh hysterical guffaws.

It's a little harder for Goober to take this one good-natured, like he has the rest. It's nearly daylight by the time he finally works his way back to camp. The gangling poke is taking it slow, too. He's got a long cottonwood limb. He scrapes and beats the ground ahead of him a good bit before he steps forward. It looks like Goober don't aim to take no chances in a snake country like this.

He's finally found that cord tied around his belt and figured it out. Me and Pa lay quiet when he comes in. Out of a slit between my eyelashes, I see Goober glare hard at Pa, then lay down and go to sleep.

Next day, Pa don't mention the joke at all. He busts out laughing every once in a while, though. And it don't take an unusual smart man to figure out just what he's laughing about.

It's about three o'clock that afternoon before Goober seems to liven up any at all.

"I got it, Sorry," he says to me in private. "I aim to scare the whey out of that old scallawag."

And then he tells me.

"Hedgehog" Mason owns the Triangle W spread about a half of a mile on down the creek. He's a blowhard and a hot temper, that old man. He's foreign blood and half-loco, folks say. He don't like anybody messing around on his land.

As for fishing in his Spring Hole, Hedgehog has run three hombres out of there in the last month, and has served notice that the next man caught fishing there will be shot. Everybody knows old Hedgehog is not just batting his gums when he says it, too. The old man's mean like that. He's mighty apt to do what he says. That fishing hole is his pet spot. It's got plenty fish in it, and he wants it to stay that way.

Well, Goober limbers up, laughs about the rattler joke, and gets plumb good-humored. Goober says it's no use to get sore over a thing like that, and you can tell Pa is glad. Pa wants Goober to be in a good humor so he can pull another prank on him pretty soon. And on me too, of course, if he gets a chance.

But we just about fail in talking Pa into fishing that Spring Hole. Pa and old Hedgehog have had several run-ins. They just barely are speaking to each other, as it is. But Pa sure would like to get in that catfish hole, I can tell.

So, long about four o'clock, we talk him into it.

PA catches a catfish nearly about as soon as he throws his line in. It tickles him a right smart.

Goober says he can tell we're really gonna pack fish out of there. But before Goober gets settled down to fishing, he wants to scamper up a little seep-bank and over the bluff to where a drink spring is flowing clear and cold.

Me and Pa settle down to fishing. Pretty soon, the old man's so absorbed in his favorite pastime that he's plumb lost to the world.

That's when the bullet chips a piece off the rock Pa's sitting on.

A bellow like a bull with his tail in a pot of scalding grease, floats across the creek from the direction of the Triangle W ranch headquarters.

It plumb salivates Pa for a second or two. He just freezes so solid there for a moment that he looks like part of the limestone rock itself.

It don't enter Pa's mind that this bellering madman could be Goober. The cowpoke had gone off in the opposite direction. Too, this shooting demon is growling in low undertones, and there's deep rumblings in his throat. It sounds like old Hedgehog, sure enough.

"I done warned enough about fishin' in my hole, ay gott!" our visitor hollers. "Now I goan kill efer tamn one I find thar!"

This is followed by some more hoarse scrapings and a good deal of cussing. The second bullet follows the speech, too, and it makes gravel of a sizeable slice of shale near Pa's right foot.

That second one's enough. Pa sort of erupts and spins around as he's rising. He throws gravel in six directions while his feet scrape the ground for more speed.

Pa makes Goober's rattlesnake take-off look like the feeble, walking-cane efforts of a ninety-year-old grandpa. Pa falls three times before he stumbles flat out of sight in the low shinnery. He don't say a thing though. He just grunts big, gets up, and starts skinning up the ground with his feet again.

It's not that Pa hasn't as much grit in his craw as the next man. He can stand up for his rights when he knows he's right. But Pa knows he's in the wrong here, and he don't aim to be found with a slug in his liver to prove it.

I follow him to make it look natural. Goober follows too. He's grunting and bellering and cussing. He's shooting a slug over Pa's head now and then, too, and it's a right speed-suggesting feeling to hear buzzing lead whine out a trail through the brush.

Pa don't stop until he gets a coupla hundred yards within Pack Sand territory. When me and Goober walk up, Pa asks:

"Is he still follerin' us, boys?"

We've done laughed ourselves down, so we figure to carry the thing a little further.

"Might be," I say. "That old devil don't know when to quit when he gets killin' mad."

"Maybe he's slippin' up, tryin' to pot-shot us from hidin'," Goober offers.

"Be quiet, boys!"

Pa throws his head up like a buck deer that's winded a catamount.

"Just an old cow in the brush," I say, trying to sound like I don't believe my own words.

"No, it ain't," Pa insists. "Too creepy for that."

He hunkers down behind that log he's been sitting on, straining to make out what's stirring back there in the brush. He's bent over so far that I can even read across the thick patch on the seat of his pants. It says "Buckwheat Flour Mills." Pa hates to throw away a pair of pants. They get comfortable and he'll even patch the patches to make them last.

Pa sidles around a litle then and sets back on a rocky knoll, still trying to see through that brush.

It's then I see the rattler he's set on.

The snake goes *pszzzzzz* under him.

Pa don't hesitate. His nerves are on edge anyhow. He rises straight up with a yell, and it looks like he's got a good running start before his boots even touch the ground.

What worries me and Goober is that the rattlesnake is still with him when Pa knocks a hole in the brush a wagon could go through. That snake has hung his fangs in the patched seat of Pa's pants and can't let go.

What's more, at the speed Pa is traveling, the snake can't turn loose even if it wanted to. It looks like the rattler's tail don't touch ground for the first two hundred yards. The snake just stands straight out behind Pa. He's running that fast.

SEEMS like Pa's gone plumb crazy. It's slipped his memory, I guess, that me and Goober are along and might take a hand in saving his life. I'm straining every ounce, trying to run Pa down and de-rattle the old codger. But the way Pa's stacking distance behind him makes me feel like I'm pulling a two-pronged drag.

In a little while, Pa's running across the clearing where we're camped, but he don't even slow up here. Me and Goober are already figuring on catching a nag to run him down when Slo walks out of the far side of the clearing.

"Slo, my boy!" Pa yells. "Do something quick! The rattler has got me half-swallered already!"

I'm plumb winded. The seat of my pants is dragging out my tracks when I finally get

to where Slo's working on his Pa.

"Didn't hurt you a bit, Pa," the boy says, thankful-like. "You just plain out-pizened the critter."

And at first glance, it does look like it. Pa has whipped that little old rock rattler through the bushes so fast that the reptile's plumb limp-dead. That snake hasn't got a strip of skin big as a dirt-dauber left anywhere on his whole body.

Goober walks up then and slumps to the ground. He wipes his face with the slack in his stomach. We all three keel over for a hunk of rest then, while Slo asks what in tarnation happened. He says it got too lonesome back at headquarters, so he's come to join in the fishing.

Pretty soon Pa rises up to a sitting position and smiles sheepish.

"I just thought," he informs. "Old Hedgehog never shot a six-gun in his life. Don't use nothin' but that old shotgun of his. I've figured everything out 'ceptin how in goldingety-darn did you ever train a snake to bite a man in the right place at the right time? That was a little raw, boys. That snake could actual hurt me."

We don't ever explain a thing to Pa.

Goober just smiles and looks wise when Pa starts asking about that snake. Pa don't put much stock in thinking the snake part could have been an accident. Anything that works that good has just got to be a prank in Pa's mind.

But the snake-cure gets Pa. It stops him of pranking, and we never hear a hiccup out of the old man again. It sure seems good to me and Goober to lay down on the front gallery after a big meal and not have to be scared to go to sleep, fearing some devilment. And we sure feel glad about that hiccuping, too. That scare done more for Pa than a doctor could, the way we look at it.

But after a month or so, Goober and me ain't happy. Things seem too quiet. There's not much zip in life no more. Nobody laughs much, and it seems to be unbearable draggy.

I can tell that Goober is thinking about this one day when we wake up ahead of Pa. It's the middle of the day, and she's sure a scorcher. Goober looks at Pa sleepin' in the shade, comfortable and at peace with the world. His boots are laying on the gallery.

"If all that good can come out of the big prank we pulled on Pa," the tall poke allows, "looks like some sort of good could come out of a little one."

Goober looks at Pa's boots. He looks at the scalding-hot sand out there under the midday sun. Then he looks at me.

I sigh and smile sad-like. In a way, I sort of enjoyed the peace and quiet.

"Wait a minute," I say. "I'll rattle that loose board on the corral fence and make him think that the gelding's tryin' to break out."

That's how life comes back to the Pack Sand Ranch.

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A gun cracked from the doorway of the sheep wagon.

TWO SHARE ALIKE

By CLIFF WALTERS

Rick Alderson and Barney Cole each suspects the other of a killing—until gunsmoke settles the feud between them!

TALL, rawhide-tough Rick Alderson had to act fast to avert a runaway and a wrecked wagon. The neckyoke had snapped in two, and the load of corral poles had rolled forward, bumping the hind quarters of the gentle, bay team. Alderson swerved his horses sharply to the right, and uphill. The wagon, brake blocks squealing, stopped just before it tipped over.

Alderson leaped to the ground, reached the heads of his startled horses. "Easy, Pete. Whoa, Sam!" he said, "that down tongue kinda skinned yore legs up, didn't it?"

The pole cutter unhooked the tugs as soon as he could, frowned at the broken neckyoke, a half of which dangled from the breast strap of each horse. Then he looked toward a nearby cabin which loomed from the green acres surrounding Slope Springs.

A man stood in the open doorway of that

cabin. He was Barney Cole, husky, dark of hair, who had bought the Slope Springs place a year before. Cole offered no word of greeting to Rick Alderson. Nor did he offer the shabbily-dressed, sandy-haired pole cutter the use of a neckyoke—although a long-idle wagon stood near the cabin. Cole merely stood and stared. Alderson could feel the hostility of the rancher's dark eyes, even though he was too far away to see it.

Rick Alderson turned his back and wished his mishap—as long as it had to happen—had occurred elsewhere. Well, it was only four miles down to Camptown. He could ride down there, stay overnight and come back in the morning, bringing a new neckyoke, to get his wagon. It was getting along toward dark now.

Savory, tempting, there came drifting across the August night the smell of frying spuds and frying sagehen. That smell emanated from Barney Cole's cabin and sharply reminded Rick Alderson that he had missed his dinner that day.

Perhaps it was to escape that haunting, appetizing odor that Alderson hopped to the back of his bigger horse and, letting the other horse follow, headed for Camptown.

"Howdy, Rick!" called a voice.

Alderson turned and saw "Chain" Hampler, a sheepman, angling down the slope on his old roan horse. Chain Hampler, squat of build, mild of manner, whose nickname had derived from the jingling under-chains he wore on his heavy and mismated spurs.

"Looks like yuh had some tough luck, Rick." Chain Hampler looked at the broken neckyoke lying in front of the pole-laden wagon. "Lucky, though, yuh didn't have a runaway and break yore neck."

"Which would probably have pleased that coyote standin' at the door of his den over there," said Rick in a low voice, and jerked his head at the Cole cabin.

"Mebbe he'd lend *me* his neckyoke," Hampler said. "It'd save yuh—"

"I'd let this wagon stay here till it rotted 'fore I'd ask any favors of that coyote Cole, even in a roundabout way," Alderson remarked significantly, and with brittleness in his tone.

Chain Hampler, who was talking of selling the thousand head of sheep he herded himself, sniffed the air.

"Kinda smells like Barney's killed some sagehens," he said.

"That ain't all he's killed," answered Alderson, blue eyes smouldering at the man in the doorway of the cabin.

"Hey, Chain!" yelled Barney Cole. "Better come over and have supper with me. I've got plenty of grub cooked up."

"Enough for three of us?" called the sheepman.

Cole offered no reply to that.

Alderson, eager to get away, rode on toward Camptown. The pole cutter was irked at mild-mannered, genial Chain Hampler about that "three" business. That's why, as he rode along, Rick Alderson mumbled to himself:

"I'll never be hungry enough to eat outa the same trough with that murderin' swine, Barney Cole!"

AFTER spending the night in the loft of Vance Melgarth's livery stable in Camptown, Rick Alderson went in quest of his deserted wagon. But he didn't have to ride a work horse this morning. He rode, and led his team behind a wagon. This wagon belonged to paunchy, bald-headed Vance Melgarth, who was enroute to the cedared foothills for a load of firewood.

The two men were in sight of the cabin at Slope Springs when Melgarth said, "Reckon you and Barney Cole'll every bury the hatchet—except mebbe in each other's skulls—huh, Rick?"

"It'll be a cold day when I shake a hand that's got blood on it, Vance," Rick answered. "The blood of my Uncle Dan."

"Funny thing about that," said the stablekeeper, stuffing tobacco into his pipe. "I've been in Camptown for six months now, and I've heard the story both ways. Some say that the old trapper, Dan Northcutt, was killed and robbed of his life savin's by his young pard, Barney Cole. That it was Dan Northcutt's money that bought the Slope Springs place which Cole now owns."

"Shore," replied Alderson bitterly. "But Cole still claims, like he did when they had him in court, that he won three thousand dollars gamblin' over in Deadwood—right after Uncle Dan disappeared from the face of the earth. Yeah—gamblin'! If he's *that* good at it, why's he wastin' his time around here?"

Melgarth puffed at his pipe. "That's one side of the story. On the other hand—" He hesitated.

"I know," Alderson cut in crisply. "*I* had a row with Uncle Dan, and quit trappin' with him. And, because of some things Barney Cole said, I was hauled up in court. But they couldn't prove a thing on me."

"Nope," Melgarth agreed. "Nor on Cole, neither. Now you blame Barney for murder, and he lays that same murder at yore door, Rick. I guess people'll never *know* which one of yuh—"

"I know!" Alderson retorted. "And everybody knows that Uncle Dan had quite a money cache. They also know, if they've got more sense than a mule, that Cole spent three thousand for the Slope Springs place."

"Don't get riled at me, Rick, just 'cause

I'm repeatin' what—"

"I'm gettin' sick of bein' called a murderer."

"So's Barney—mebbe," replied Melgarth. "Oh, well. Let's forget it."

"Yeah," Rick Alderson answered. "Just put yoreself in my boots sometime—and try to forget it. Pass Slope Springs with a load of poles every few days, like I do, and watch that coyote Cole gawkin' at yuh, and hear him sayin', 'Work and sweat for a livin', Rick Alderson, while I take it easy on my new ranch—and prosper. You share my guilt, Alderson, but I won the jackpot.' "

"If that's the way yuh feel, why don't yuh pull outa this country?" Melgarth suggested gently. "After all, you ain't gettin' rich draggin' poles down off the mountain, and pilin' 'em up to be sold in Camptown."

"Run away from something I didn't do?" was Alderson's reply. "Then *all* the folks on this range would think I was runnin' from somethin'—instead of about half of 'em believin' me guilty of murder!"

They were approaching the pole-laden wagon. The first thing the owner noticed was that the binder chain had been loosened. And that four of those eighteen-foot pine poles were missing from the center of the top tier. Alderson's blue eyes narrowed as he looked toward the cabin owned by Barney Cole. Then, purposefully, he was leaving Melgarth and striding toward that cabin, then around to the far side of it—the side hidden from the road.

There was some freshly-cut firewood around there on Cole's woodpile. It was fine wood.

"What are yuh doin' on my place?" demanded husky Barney Cole. He was coming around the cabin and looked as if he had just risen.

"Just checkin' up on a thievin' skunk," said Alderson. He pointed to the firewood. "Yuh dirty, red-handed sneak. I thought a murderer, that was practised at coverin' up, would do a little better job of—"

Anger was a dark tide sweeping across Barney Cole's face. Big fists clenched tightly. The rancher growled, "So yuh brought yore friend, Melgarth, out from town just to show him how I—" Wrath choked off the words rumbling from the husky man's throat.

"Sneakin' coyote!" Alderson said coldly, "Murderin' coyote!"

Barney Cole flung himself at his accuser, and Alderson, sensing that the goaded, challenged man would leap, could feel the breeze of a big fist sailing past his face. A blow which had barely missed, and only because Rick had been agile.

Swift to counter, and eager to punish, Alderson shot over a right smash of his own. One that didn't land squarely, it is true, but which raked hide from the left side of Cole's grim face. A savage left hook thudded against Cole's ribs, followed by a jolting right that pounded his nose to start blood flowing.

Cole, roaring with rage, waded in and shook Rick with a stiff punch to the body, another to the face. From then on it was give and take. If Rick Alderson hadn't been agile, rawhide-tough and mad enough to fight a wounded grizzly, he might have been quickly vanquished by an opponent who was far from slow. Furthermore, Cole possessed a weight advantage.

Boot heels raked ugly scars in the ground over which the two enraged men battled. Two men whose stone-hard knuckles had long tingled in anticipation of this clash that, as everyone expected, had eventually come. Blood trickled from Barney Cole's battered nose. Also from the knuckle-split mouth of Rick Alderson.

The pace was furious!

Both men were reeling a little under the exchange of punishment when Vance Melgarth, running toward the scene, grabbed up Cole's axe and rushed between the two hard-breathing contestants.

"Stop it!" Melgarth bellowed, brandishing the axe—and the two fighters, thus menaced, moved back panting from each other.

"I didn't steal his poles," Cole said thickly. "I never touched 'em. I wasn't home last night."

"Lyin' murderer!" Alderson retorted, his eyes aflame with hostility.

"If one of us is a murderer, it's you," Cole countered. "And yuh know it. Some day yuh'll quit posin' around in them ragged duds as a poor, hard-workin' pole cutter. Then yuh'll go out and blow the money yuh stole from old Dan Northcutt—'fore yuh rolled his body in some crevice or crick."

"My uncle's money has already been spent. *You* bought this place with it." Alderson looked at the pile of freshly-cut firewood. Suddenly he picked up his fallen hat and walked back toward his wagon.

"Yuh better clear out!" Cole called. "If yuh ever set foot on this place again, yuh'll have to be carried off!"

"Shut up, Cole!" rumbled Melgarth. "I've got you two apart. I don't want yuh tanglin' again."

RICK ALDERSON was hitching up his team when Chain Hampler came riding down the slope. The sheepman, a look of surprise on his genial face, looked at Alderson, looked at the cabin where Cole and Melgarth were talking, then back at Rick again.

"It must've happened," Chain Hampler said, focusing mild eyes on the pole cutter's battered countenance.

"It's started," Alderson said darkly. "It ain't finished yet."

Hampler shook his head slowly. "I s'pose, when it does finish, that either you or Barney'll have *two* killin's on yore hands."

"If I have one, it'll be the first one," Alderson retorted angrily. "Yuh can believe what yuh want to, though. And gossip about it."

"Hold on," said the sheepman gently. "I was only tryin' to point out the danger lyin' ahead of yuh. But I didn't come down here to preach, Rick. I decided last night to build a sheep corral over where I'm camped now—at Cone Butte. And if yuh'll trust me for that load of poles till I can sell some sheep next fall—"

"I thought yuh'd been wantin' to sell all yore woolies now, instead of investin' more money in the business," Alderson cut in. "Still, if yuh want these poles, yuh can have 'em. And pay me next fall."

"Fair enough. I'll go over with yuh and show yuh where to unload 'em." Astride his sleepy roan, Hampler started leading the way.

There was a lot of uphill between Slope Springs and Cone Butte, especially near the remote spot where Chain Hampler's old sheep wagon loomed from the sagebrush. Alderson was resting his team and talking to Hampler when, around the butte, came a gangling rider who was slowly herding some five hundred head of yearling wethers toward the Hampler camp. Rick recognized that gangling rider. He was Brad Barstow who worked for a prosperous sheepman named McVerish, over on Fern Creek.

"Now, what the—" Hampler began. He quickly reined his roan toward the oncoming sheep.

Alderson's gaze shifted idly to a coyote scare that Chain Hampler had placed near the barren, brown spot where his sheep bedded down. It was a crude sort of miniature scarecrow. A cross which, stuck into the ground, was clothed with a faded gray flannel shirt that fluttered a little in the morning breeze.

Alderson could hear Chain Hampler saying to Barstow, "—ahead of time. I told McVerish I couldn't take delivery on them sheep till the end of the week. Or pay for 'em till I got the check from my brother down in Utah."

"All I know is that the boss said to fetch 'em over here to you," replied Barstow. The two speakers drew closer together and Alderson, still gazing at the coyote scare, couldn't catch any more of what was being said.

Hampler and Barstow rode on over to the sheep wagon. Rick Alderson started his rested team and pulled another hundred yards uphill. Then, hopping off the pole-laden wagon, and blocking the rear wheel with a rock, he moved quickly through the sagebrush. And along a course which brought him to the side of the sheep wagon where he stopped.

Inside the wagon, Chain Hampler was saying to Brad Barstow, and in a low voice, "I'll count out yore money, Barstow. Reason I made the loud talk about the check from Utah business was that I've just got enough cash to pay for these sheep yuh brought. And I'm askin' Rick Alderson to trust me for a load of poles. I'm s'posed to be the hard-up sheepman, yuh know."

"Shore," said gangling, hard-eyed Brad Barstow, without mirth in his short laugh. "And don't forget to count out half-price for that extry fifty head of McVerish's sheep which is in that little bunch out there—which old Mac is goin' to accuse one of his herders of losin'."

"Yuh'll get yores," said Hampler. Alderson, as statuesque now as the coyote scare with the gray flannel shirt on it, could hear the clink of coins inside the sheep wagon.

"Gold dollars," remarked Barstow. "And three five-hundred-dollar bills. That's more cash money than I've seen since—well—"

"Since yuh helped rob that bank down at—"

"Never mind the past," Barstow growled. "Just fork over that money, Mr. Hampler. And fast, too, if yuh don't want that pole peddler comin' up here askin' yuh where to dump his load."

It wasn't long before Brad Barstow stepped down out of the sheep wagon and moved toward his waiting horse. Then Rick Alderson, jaw set grimly, suddenly appeared and blocked the gangling man's path.

Eyes clashed for a moment. Barstow turned to Chain Hampler, who stood in the doorway of his wagon, "I guess this battered-up gent wants to see yuh, Chain," Barstow said.

"Yeah, I do." Alderson's tone was harsh, cryptic. "I want to know where yuh dug up all those gold dollars, and the five-hundred-dollar bills that's in Barstow's bulgin' pocket right now, Mr. Hampler."

The sheepman stiffened ever so slightly, yet his voice was mild as he answered, "Bills? Gold dollars? I'm afraid I don't know what yuh're talkin' about, Rick. Did Barney Cole jar yore brains up so much with his big fists that—"

"My brain's as good as it ever was," Alderson cut in metallically. "So are my ears. And my eyes, too, even if one of 'em is a little black. Yuh're buyin' sheep—fifty of 'em stolen from McVerish, and by Barstow, with stolen money, Mr. Hampler. Money that was—"

"We'll have to take care of this locoed gent, Brad," cut in Hampler. "Grab him while I—"

Gangling, hard-eyed Barstow didn't grab at the man who was exchanging hard words with Hampler. Barstow lashed out with a savage blow intended for the base of Alderson's ear, a punch that would have felled him had it landed squarely, and with all its force.

It only spun Alderson around on the heels of his worn-out boots. Then, like a goaded wildcat, he tangled with Barstow who knew all the vicious, any-way-to-win tactics born of barroom brawls. Only a man as tough and determined as Rick Alderson could have withstood the merciless punishment that Barstow, the ex-badman, dealt out with knees, elbows and treacherous hands during those first few seconds.

IT was a smashing left to the body that bent Barstow over a little. Then Alderson caught him with a terrific right to the face and fell with Barstow as the latter went down and sought, dazedly, to rise.

Alderson was clawing at Barstow's pocket as the two men struggled fiercely there on the ground.

"I'll see that money or I'll—" Rick yelled.

A gun cracked from the doorway of the sheepwagon, a gun in the hand of Chain Hampler. But it was Brad Barstow who stiffened a little, relaxed his hold on Alderson and groaned, "You've shot *me*, Hampler! What the—"

"I can still use that money yuh're packin', Brad." Hampler's tone was glacial, his eyes deadly. "But that's all right. Neither one of you gents'll ever get up. Now, Mister Alderson, it's yore turn."

Breaking free of Barstow, Rick Alderson came desperately to his feet. With swollen, discolored eyes, he looked at the old black gun in Chain Hampler's steady hand. A gun, lifting for the kill, that seemed to cast a dark shadow over the Cone Butte range where the tinkle of sheep bells rode the breeze.

Yet, it was not fear that Rick Alderson experienced in that instant of impending doom. It was disappointment, anger, frustration. Just when he had discovered—

The black gun came up!

Then, from behind Rick, another gun cracked. This time it was Chain Hampler who stiffened a little, who clutched at the side of the sheep wagon entrance, then came crashing down on the double-trees that served as a step.

Again Rick Alderson was a statue for a moment. Then he turned slowly and saw Barney Cole, his enemy, walking toward the wagon. Rick, battered and bleeding at the corner of his mouth, looked at Barney Cole's bruised, discolored face.

"Well?" Alderson managed to say.

"I was trailin' yuh," Cole answered, watching Hampler who, not too badly wounded in the side, lay groaning beside the tongue of his wagon. "I thought yuh'd cut up four of yore own poles for firewood planted at my cabin, and had brought Vance Melgarth along—later—for a witness. And I thought it was you that planted *this* in my cabin."

Rick Alderson stared as Barney Cole took from his pocket a large old silver-cased watch on the back of which was carved a buffalo skull.

"There Will Be War on the Big Rancho—and Only the Masked Rider Can Help!"

THUS spoke *Viejo*, the old Indian—and he advised Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk to go to the Golden Ranch, and see Jim Bradshaw there. Trouble was in the making.

The Masked Rider never sidestepped trouble—and so he headed for Verde Valley. Immediately he came upon a scene of strife. He saw the peaked crown of a cowboy under a gray Stetson moving through the brush. A killer was in ambush, taking six-shooter aim.

Swiftly, the Masked Rider drew his gun—the gray Stetson leaped into the air, and the imperiled cowboy threw himself down and made himself thin on the ground. His life was saved.

That was Wayne Morgan's introduction to the fierce feud that waged in Verde Valley—and he devoted himself to clearing up the sinister mystery in MONTEZUMA'S GOLD, a smashing novel by Chuck Martin in which an ancient curse causes bloodshed and violence. It's one of the best and most colorful Western yarns ever told—and it's featured in our next issue!

"Uncle Dan's watch!" said Alderson. "I didn't put it in yore cabin. Nor I didn't cut up my own poles in yore dooryard. Yuh didn't, either, Cole. But I didn't notice, till after Melgarth had parted us this morning, that the poor wood-choppin' on them poles looks—well—just like that wood-choppin' there." Alderson pointed to Chain Hampler's little woodpile.

"Yep," said Barney Cole. "A man that couldn't hit the same mark twice with an axe—like some kid had done it. Well, I was away last night. And Hampler knew I'd be away."

"*He'll* never get away from this!" Alderson said. He stooped over and took a quantity of money—gold dollars and currency—from the pocket of the man Hampler had killed.

It was Barney Cole who stared now, who listened tensely to the story Rick Alderson told him about the sheep deal between Hampler and Barstow.

"So it was Hampler that got away with Dan Northcutt's money and his life," Cole said. "I remember Dan tellin' me about his gold dollars."

"Get me to town!" Hampler begged feebly. "Don't stand there gabbin'. I'll admit the killin' of Northcutt, and the killin' of Barstow if you'll only—"

"Don't worry," Alderson said. "I'll haul yuh to town. But it won't hurt yuh to suffer a little. Suffer like Barney Cole and me have suffered—and for something that neither one of us done."

"That's right," Barney Cole agreed. "I'm glad I had the privilege of shootin' you, Hampler. I'm beginnin' to feel better already."

"Why *did* yuh shoot him?" Rick Alderson asked. "You must've felt, even while yuh was pullin' the trigger, that he was yore friend, and that I was yore enemy."

"Mebbe," Cole answered, "it kinda turned my stomach to see one man killin'—murderin'—another in cold blood. Or mebbe—" the hint of a smile lighted his battered face—"I didn't want to carry the burden of Dan Northcutt's killin' all alone. Yuh see, Rick, with you livin', and sharin' half the blame—"

"Mebbe we can share a little relief now," said Rick. "And while Chain Hampler starts findin' out what *real* chains feel like."

"No more pole cuttin' for you, I guess," said Barney Cole. "Yuh'll inherit this money of yore uncle's. That's a cinch. Yeah, if yuh want to buy some cattle with it, I've got plenty of ranch and range for both of us."

"You mean—pards?" Alderson's voice was suddenly a bit unsteady.

"Why not?" Barney Cole answered. "Yuh've took a load off my mind this mornin'. As well as a load of imaginary guilt off yore own shoulders. Besides, yore Uncle Dan always said yuh made the best flapjacks he ever tasted." His own voice unsteady now, Barney Cole offered his hand.

Rick Alderson gripped that hand, the battle-skinned hand of his erstwhile enemy, his future pard, and said, "I'm kinda glad I got curious enough to leave my team down there and come up here—while coyote Hampler and Barstow was transactin' their shady business."

"What made you curious?" Cole asked.

"That old coyote scare down there." Alderson pointed to a gray flannel shirt which, clothing a crude scarecrow, flapped idly in the breeze. "If yuh'll go down there, yuh'll see it's got a couple of cowhorn buttons on it—the kind of buttons Uncle Dan used to whittle out when he was killin' time.

"That old shirt's also got a small hole in the back of it—and a bigger hole where Chain Hampler's bullet came out, in the front." Rick Alderson suddenly whirled to fasten his hard gaze on Hampler. "Ain't that right yuh sneakin' murderer?"

"Yuh-yeah," Hampler gulped, cringing under those blazing blue eyes. "I wish now I'd burned that old shirt of Dan Northcutt's, 'stead of usin' it for a—"

"A coyote *trap*," Alderson cut in, "as well as a coyote scare."

The horse was on top of old Sigafoose before he could fire again

X MARKS THE SPOT

By CHUCK MARTIN

Above the thunder of flaming guns, old Ranse Sigafoose heard the clear call of duty—and obeyed its summons!

RANSE SIGAFOOSE didn't think of Barney Barstow as his son-in-law. They were partners in the Half Circle B, and they had built up the little spread into a profitable cattle business. Ranse was fifty-one, but he was the old man of the outfit which some day would belong to Barney and Mary—and their heirs.

Mary was the center about which all activities on the Half Circle B revolved. She was old Ranse's only child, and she and Barney, who was twenty-four, six feet tall, and weighed a hundred and eighty, had been married two years.

The stork was expected at any time, and old Ranse wanted to celebrate two important events together. The baby would be named after him, and Mary would have the honor of burning the mortgage which would make the Half Circle B free of debt.

Ranse had argued with Barney about the cattle drive in prospect, but had been overruled by a majority vote. Ranse held that Barney should stay at the ranch with Mary, just in case. He could hire a couple of hands and make the drive to the rail-head with their shipping steers.

Mary, however, had insisted that she would be all right with Aunt Carrie who made her home on the Half Circle B, and looked after the house. Barney had agreed with his wife, telling old Ranse that he would help with the drive, then whip a pony down the hind legs getting back home.

The drive had been a matter of routine, and with the cattle safe in the shipping pens, Barney Barstow had changed his saddle to his top horse and had lit out for home. Ranse would pay off the help and collect for the shippers.

"You burn that hoss' hocks and get back there to look after Mary and little Ranse," he had told Barney gruffly. "Shouldn't have left her in the first place!"

After the cattle buyer had made his tally and had paid Ranse Sigafoose in cash, the old cattleman had wasted little time in town. It was a little more than thirty miles back to the Half Circle B, and by crowding his deep-chested roan horse, he could make it back by suppertime. The drive had taken three days.

It was mid-afternoon, with ten miles to go, when Ranse Sigafoose reached the steep trail which skirted the edge of Skull Canyon. Larado Valley laid behind him, and he was telling himself that an old cowboy's dreams were about to be fulfilled on the Half Circle B. He would make a tophand of little Ranse, and there was a colt he already was gentling for the "little feller" to ride.

THE old cattleman was enjoying his dreams when he came to a fork in the trail. The lower trail was subject to slides, but it would cut off a mile, and old Sigafoose did not want to waste any time. Besides his keen eyes had detected the marks of four shod horses on the upper trail, and he didn't want company at a time like this.

This decision postponed the trouble awaiting him up ahead. But as the two trails came together again, up near Cottonwood Bend, and as Sigafoose neared the juncture, he heard the thud of racing hoofs coming along the upper trail.

Four riders were racing toward him with horses in a dead run. Guns began to roar, and bullets whined all about old Ranse as he hit his horse with the hooks and made it a race. He had forgotten about the money in his hip pocket until he recognized the big outlaw, Jim Ransom, and the black stallion Ransom rode.

Old Ranse crouched along the neck of his roan and held his advantage for the first mile. He didn't try to return the fire of the outlaws who were mounted on fresh horses. His roan had covered twenty miles since morning, and there was only one place where he could make a stand if they crowded him too close.

A lucky shot—lucky for the pursuing outlaws—struck the roan high in the flank and made the courageous horse falter. Sigafoose fumbled for his tally book and stubby pencil. There wouldn't be much time for writing, but Barney would read sign and understand. Old Sigafoose drew rein, scrawled a brief message, and tucked the paper in his saddle-bag on the right side.

Rounding a hairpin turn near a shale slide, Ranse Sigafoose pulled his bedroll from behind his saddle, hooked his reins over the saddle-horn and, after sliding down the left side, slapped the spent horse with his battered old Stetson. Without a rider, the horse would have a chance to make it back to the Half Circle B, and Barney Barstow would get his partner's message for help.

Sigafoose forted up behind the rocky slide with his thirty-gun in his rope-burned hands, and a brace of cedar-handled .45 sixes snugged down in the scabbards on his lean thighs. His position commanded the one-way trail leading up from Larado Valley where Jim Ransom and his crew of trail-wolves had tried a bushwhack play from the brush.

The raw-boned cattleman could feel the bulge of paper and gold money in his left hip pocket. Four thousand dollars which had been traded for two hundred head of beef steers, and which would clear the Half Circle B of debt, providing the money did not change ownership on the trail. Sigafoose vowed grimly that Ransom would get it only from his dead body, which was what Ransom intended doing.

Sigafoose had thought of taking a chance of sending the money home with the horse, but had finally decided against taking the risk. He had another plan if the worst came. He had read somewhere that money wasn't everything, but in his range-wise philosophy, Ranse Sigafoose told himself that some of it was necessary in order to maintain a well-balanced life.

A volley of shots barked flatly from the bottom of the steep trail. The slugs sought out weak places in the cattleman's fort, and whined away like angry hornets. Sigafoose fined his sights and squeezed off a slow shot with the rifle-stock cuddled against his leathery cheek.

A big man wearing a dirty white shirt let out a yell of anguish. The rustler threw his bridle reins away and pitched from his plunging horse. Sigafoose grunted grimly as he recognized the man. If his slug hadn't done for "Tiny" Whitelaw, that fall into Skull Canyon would finish what he had started.

Bullets whined high above the rocky fort, and Sigafoose knew that the rustlers were shooting at his horse. He fired at the gun-flashes down the trail until there were no more slugs in his saddle-gun. He drew his right six-shooter and laid it close by while reloading his rifle, and cocked his head to one side when a raucous voice bellowed from down the trail.

"Yuh can't take it with yuh, Sigafoose! Throw that money out on the ground and ride away free. You put up any more fight, we aim to burn the Half Circle B to the ground. Jim Ransom talking!"

Ranse Sigafoose grunted that he would take it with him or quit doing what he was doing. A man couldn't live forever, and he had seen many things once. He was fifty-one, by dogies, and had started on the cycle of repeating himself anyhow.

But Barney Barstow was different. Barney was only twenty-four, and was about to become a father. Perhaps the little cowboy had already arrived. The devil with Jim Ransom and his trail wolves! Sigafoose yell-

ed his defiance down the trail in his booming, wind-roughened voice.

A BULLET was his answer. It struck the rifle in his hands and tore the heavy weapon from his grasp. A splinter struck the old cattleman in the forehead and sent a trickle of blood into his left eye, but he knew all the tricks. He knew that bullet had come from above him, and out in front. He glanced up with his six-shooter eared back for a shot, and the gun roared like a cannon when he saw a leather-clad leg high up in a cottonwood tree.

The bushwhacker screamed like a Comanche and plunged from his leafy hiding place. Ranse Sigafoose threw back his bleeding head and whooped his war-cry like an Indian brave who has counted coup.

"Yahoo! Come and get me, yuh mangy shorthorns!"

Sigafoose fired his six-shooter with his right hand, and reached for the canvas sack containing the money with his left. He fired steadily as his left hand fumbled among the shaly rocks between his bony knees. With his meat-gun empty and no time to reload, the old cattleman drew his spare and shifted it to his right hand.

Guns were blazing from down the trail, with bullets hammering against the rocks. Three saddles were empty down below, but to Jim Ransom, with a price on his head, his men were expendable. Here today and gone tomorrow. A short life but a merry one for those who rode the owlhoot trail.

A slug ripped into the old cattleman's left shoulder and knocked him sprawling. A rocky splinter creased his scalp without doing serious damage, but when old Sigafoose regained his balance, horses were stampeding up the steep trail.

The old cattleman threw down for a shot and then held his fire. A cowboy didn't kill horseflesh wantonly. Two horses were coming at him, but they carried no riders. Another riderless horse was crowding behind the leaders and coming on fast.

Ranse Sigafoose knew that he had waited too long when he saw the rider behind the three stampeding horses. He held his Colt .45 in both gnarled hands and tripped the trigger.

The horse hugging the canyon wall faltered and lurched against its mate on the edge of the trail. Both went over, screaming with terror, but the third horse was on top of the old cattleman before he could thumb back and fire again.

Sigafoose went sideward as the horse leaped high and scattered his barricade. A six-shooter began to hammer at close range just as Sigafoose sat up and swung his gun to cover Jim Ransom.

The outlaw was a big man, though slender, and he was turned in the saddle to thin the target he made. His gun barked savagely to jar the old cattleman back against a rock, and Ransom fired a follow-up with a grim smile splitting his thin lips.

Ransom slid his horse to a stop with the curb bit, and dismounted, running. His last shot had found the old rawhider's heart, and Ransom turned the twitching body with the toe of his right boot. Smoking six-shooter in his right hand, he searched the body with his left.

The outlaw cursed viciously when his search went unrewarded. A handful of empty cartridge shells near his victim's body winked up to mock him. Ransom's dark, evil face lighted up with sudden realization. The old rawhider must have sent the money on the roan horse he had whooped up the trail before making his last stand. . . .

* * * * * * *

Barney Barstow was trembling like a young hunter with the buck ague. The door to Mary's room was closed. Mary was going down into the Valley of the Shadows, and when she returned, she would bring back a new life with her.

The big cowboy screwed his eyes shut and clenched his strong brown hands. Then his lips began to move, whispering hoarsely.

"Pour it on me, Big Boss," he prayed a cowboy's prayer. "Give me big men to fight, but make it easy on Mary!"

The door opened soundlessly and Aunt Carrie stood there, holding a blanketed bundle in her plump arms. She was smiling proudly, and feeling plenty important.

"Buck up, Daddy," she teased young Barney. "Get up on your hind legs and say 'Hello' to little Ranse Barstow!"

Barney Barstow stood up and tiptoed across the room. He stared at the wizened little red face of his son, with both big hands behind his broad back. Then he went into the bedroom and knelt beside the bed from which Mary was smiling up at him.

"Howdy, Daddy," she said weakly, but her brown eyes were smiling with happiness.

Barney lowered his head and kissed his wife while hot mists scalded his blue eyes. He didn't say anything, but his wide shoulders began to shake. Then he was crying, with his face buried against Mary's soft shoulder. After a moment, he sniffled, reached for his bandanna, and blew his nose loudly. "Won't old Ranse be proud of the button!" he whispered huskily.

MARY didn't seem to hear what he said. She was leaning forward as though lis-

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tening. Barney also cocked his head, as the rattle of hoofs sounded out in the big yard. Then came a heavy thud.

"Something has happened to old Ranse!" Mary said in a hushed voice. "I thought I was dreaming, Barney. When I was far away and down in the Dark Valley, I thought I passed him on the trail. I brought little Ranse up with me, but not old Ranse."

Barney Barstow didn't try to argue. Old Ranse was not the kind to fall from a horse, and the old cattleman knew every foot of the mountain country. A horse had staggered into the Half Circle B yard and had fallen by the tie-rail near the front gallery. Without speaking, Barstow tugged his Stetson low over his smoldering eyes and went swiftly from the room.

He hesitated when he saw the dead roan horse on the ground with blood covering the left flank, and another wound in the neck. He noticed the absence of the bedroll, and began to read sign.

Old Ranse had been in a gunfight, and had sent his horse home for help. Perhaps he had also sent the money. But Barney shook his curly blond head. Still, there should be a message of some kind.

Running his hand in the saddle-bags, Barstow found the page torn from the old cattleman's tally book. The cowboy stared at the scrawled writing, then ran to the barn. He saddled a big blood bay and quit the ranch without returning to the house, knowing that Mary would want it that way.

They were not just partners, he and old Ranse. They were more like brothers, with old Ranse giving the younger man all the best of it. Old Ranse had often said that all he wanted was a home with his two chips, Barney and Mary. And the little cowboy, old Ranse had added, on the drive to the rail-head with the shipping steers.

Barney Barstow stung the bay with his blunted spurs and headed south toward the narrow pass where Skull Canyon was a one-way trail, with old cottonwood trees jutting out at the narrowest place. This would be the place where Ranse would make his stand, and Barstow was trying to analyze the old cattleman's message as he raced through the late afternoon. The scrawled message was burned indelibly into his mind. It had said:

Pard—Jim Ransom and his gang jumped me. He won't get the dinero. X marks the spot. My love to little Ranse and Mary.

Old Ranse

Barney wondered what old Ranse meant by saying that "X marks the spot," but he would find out in good time. The old cattleman was methodical in all his ways, but now

he was in danger. A cold feeling swept over Barney Barstow as he remembered what Mary had said. He didn't know much about such things, but women had ways of knowing which were denied to men, who were made of coarser clay.

There had been talk by Aunt Carrie about how women went down into the Valley of the Shadows in childbirth. And Mary herself had mentioned being far away in just such a place. She had found little Ranse, and she had dreamed. She had brought the baby up the trail with her, and had passed her father going down.

Barney Barstow shrugged his square shoulders and told himself that he was imagining things. It was tough on a man, becoming a father, and you got to kind of fighting your head. He loved old Ranse in his silent, undemonstrative way. Old Ranse was a pard to ride the river with.

The thudding hoofs of the fleet-footed bay brought Barney Barstow back to realities. His right hand went down to grip his holstered .45 Colt six-shooter. A cold anger enveloped him, and his blue eyes burned brightly between narrowed, slitted lids.

His horse came to a patch of grass which muffled the sounds of its hoofs. The opening to the trail leading along Cottonwood Bend was just ahead. Then Barstow heard the clop of shod hoofs striking on rocks, and he reined into a grassy park and dismounted.

Barstow held the nose of his horse with his left hand to prevent a warning whicker. He was shielded from the trail by the dense brush, and he loosened the gun in his holster when the ears of a black horse were sky-lined on the trail.

Jim Ransom rode a big black stallion!

For a moment, a blinding rage swept over Barney Barstow. Old Ranse had been guarding the trail, and none could have passed him while he was alive.

The black horse took shape and topped the ridge, with Jim Ransom sitting saddle, a brace of six-shooters strapped to his thighs.

Barney Barstow knew the truth then. Mary had passed old Ranse on the trail into the dark Valley of the Shadows. It was always open season on wolves, and he would shoot the killing outlaw out of his saddle before Jim Ransom could slap for his gun!

In his anger, Barney Barstow had forgotten about his own horse. His left hand had loosed its grip, and he had tied the bay with trailing whangs. The bay raised its head and whinnied at the black stallion.

JIM RANSOM straightened in his saddle as his horse stopped in its tracks. He

[*Turn page*]

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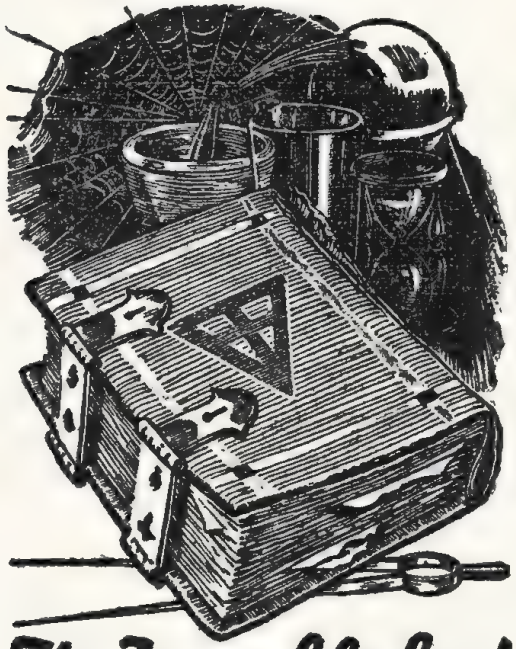

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saw Barney Barstow staring at him with certain death in his narrowed eyes. Standing spread-legged just off the trail, with his right hand on his gun. Ransom's two hands were on his saddle-horn.

He was fast, but not fast enough to beat Barstow to the draw from his position. But he knew there was a way to make up the difference, and the outlaw took it. Anger slows up a man's muscles, and blinds him temporarily. If he could make Barney Barstow mad enough he might have a chance. "Yuh lookin' for old Ranse Sigafoose?" Ransom asked quietly, and grinned when Barstow stiffened. His plan was working.

"I killed the old rawhider a while back," Ransom boasted, and his voice was louder. "I drilled the old mossyhead center!"

For a moment Barstow lost control of himself. His eyes almost closed, and then he saw the whipping flash of the outlaw's right hand. The anger left Barney Barstow as suddenly as it had seized him. His right hand jerked his six-shooter free, with thumb curling back the hammer on the draw.

Old Ranse had often told him that the battle was not always won by the man who was fastest on the draw. Among the old-timers who had lived or died by the gun, the percentage favored those who had taken enough time to fine their sights.

As Barstow's gun cleared leather, he took one swift step to the right. He saw Ransom's gun whip up, and orange flame belched from the leaping muzzle as the outlaw shot from the hip.

Barstow's gun came up as the outlaw's slug tugged at the edge of his vest. He caught the sights under his eyes, and squeezed off a shot. He leaned against the bucking gun as a man will do who knows that his slug has gone true to its mark.

Jim Ransom jerked back in the saddle and slid down the left side of his horse. The stallion took a step and began grazing.

Barney Barstow didn't even thumb back for a follow-up. He aimed for the heart, and had fined his sights. He wondered if Jim Ransom had found the money from the trail-herd sale, and after holstering his smoke-grimed pistol, Barstow went through the dead outlaw's rigging and gear.

Ransom was flat on his back, staring up at the setting sun with eyes that did not see. There were some folded papers in an upper pocket of his calf-skin vest. "Wanted" posters, with pictures, and the amount of rewards offered for capture, dead or alive.

Barney Barstow was quiet now; quiet and steady. Old Ranse was gone, but the old cattleman would see Jim Ransom coming down the Dark Trail of No Return. Old Ranse could take his rest.

Barstow read the posters with a grim smile tugging at his lips. There was a thousand dollars reward for Jim Ransom; five hundred apiece for Tiny Whitelaw and the other two owlhooters. There was no money to speak of in the outlaw's pockets or saddlebags.

After covering Ransom's face with the outlaw's hat, Barstow mounted his horse and rode slowly down the trail along Skull Canyon.

The shadows were deepening when Barstow reached the fringing cottonwoods above the narrow bend in the trail where old Ranse had made his fight. Barstow dismounted and took off his hat when he saw the body of his partner. He closed the fierce gray eyes with tender fingers. Closed his own as sobs tore at his corded throat, and blinding tears scalded his eyes.

Barney Barstow couldn't remember shedding tears before today. Life and death had caused him to do so. Once when a life had entered the world; again when a life had departed. Little Ranse, and old Ranse.

The money was gone, Barney Barstow thought dully, and somehow he didn't care much. He and old Ranse had worked long hours, for years, to build up the Half Circle B. Old Ranse had said that some day it would all belong to the Barstows, and had insisted on the "B" in the brand. Now old Ranse was gone.

[*Turn page*]

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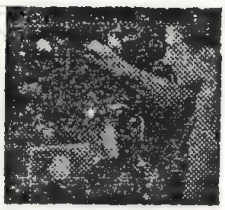

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Barstow's lip curled as he thought of the reward money. He didn't call it blood money, or a bounty, and it would pay off most of the mortgage. He opened his eyes, and for the first time, he saw the handful of gleaming brass shells from the old cattleman's guns.

There was something funny about the way they had fallen to the ground. Not in a little heap, or scattered about, but as though someone had made a pattern. Like the figure "X" for ten.

BARNEY BARSTOW held his breath as a blinding light flashed across his brain. The note old Ranse had sent home with his roan horse! That was it, and the old rawhider had marked the sign plain.

"X marks the spot!"

The empty cartridge shells were arranged to form the letter "X".

Barney Barstow expelled his breath as he stared at the symbol. Then he carefully brushed the shells aside and fumbled in the shaly rubble where the cartridges had rested. His fingers touched a canvas sack, and he pulled it from its shallow hiding place. It was the money from the sale of the trail herd.

Some day he would tell young Ranse all about it, Barney Barstow told himself. He would ride down Skull Canyon, with the little cowboy on the colt old Ranse had been gentling for the grandson he had never seen. He would tell young Ranse that the Half Circle B didn't owe a dollar, and show him where old Ranse had hidden the money.

He would leave the cartridge shells where they were. Barstow put them back the way old Ranse had left them. He would tell young Ranse that right here was where the bravest man who ever pounded leather had left a heritage to his namesake. Down there behind those rocks where you see those old brass cartridge shells. Right there, see? Where X marks the spot!

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

the link between savagery and civilization. A big frame of a man with an eagle-beak nose, he rode with his stirrups hitched up so short that his knees came up to the pommel of his saddle. He slumped rather than sat in the saddle, and altogether made a very grotesque appearance.

Saved Many Lives

Bill Williams was, however, one of the greatest scouts the West ever knew. His timely warnings saved many a man's life, for Bill seemed to know just where the Indians would strike. He lived among the Indians a great part of the time, knew their ways and their language. He could follow an Indian trail better than any man in Arizona. He was so clever at disguising his own trail that the best of the Indian trailers could not follow him.

He was a great trapper and would often stay in the mountains for months and everyone would believe him dead. Then he would take his hides into Mexico to some market, and after selling his hides spend all his money, often two or three thousand dollars, on one big spree!

No one seems to know just where or when he did die, but there is a mountain near Williams that has been named the Bill Williams Mountain, and it is upon this mountain that it is believed that he was buried. Although a stone pile monument was once started on the top of the mountain in memory of the old scout, no one knows for sure just where his remains lie.

Outlaw Billy Brazelton

In striking contrast to Old Bill Williams, with his rough but kindly ways, there was one Arizona character who stood out in bold relief from the others of his kind. He was the handsomest, most daring and most chivalrous of outlaws, Billy Brazelton. While he was a criminal of the deepest dye, still one cannot help feeling a sort of sneaking liking for some of his qualities. If he had gone straight, there's no doubt he would have had a great success in any career.

This lone stage robber of the early days of Arizona, for cool nerve and daring, had no equal. No coward could play the game like he played it and get away with it.

One can guess that it takes plenty of nerve to hold up a stagecoach single-handed with the driver armed, with a shot-gun messenger sitting on the seat with the driver and perhaps a coach full of passengers all armed, but undaunted by the odds against him Brazelton always worked alone. Only once did he break his rule of being the lone bandit and that cost him his life.

[*Turn page*]

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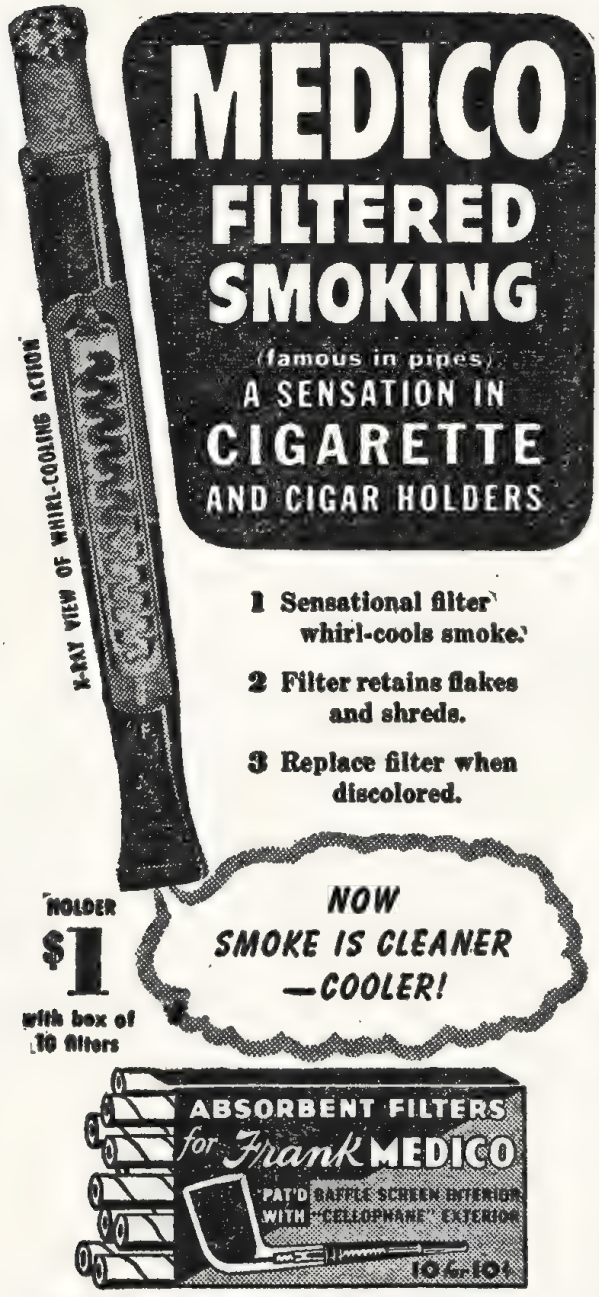

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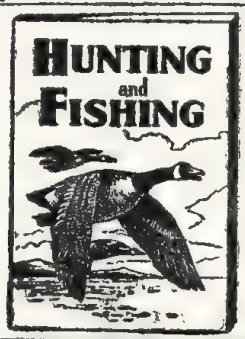

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Old timers spoke of him with admiration. He was no piker, they would say, he played the game as square as it could be played. He never took a cent from any of the poor. He was not mean. He would not kill, although he threatened with an ugly-looking gun. If shooting began he would not shoot back but left the job undone and vanished, and this was not because he was afraid, but because he would not kill.

Brazelton was six feet three inches tall, his hair was dark and wavy and hung to his shoulders. His eyes were steel grey, and those who faced those eyes looking through a black mask, and heard the voice behind that mask, were frightened even before they saw the ugly look of the gun.

When he stepped out into the road in front of a stage and commanded the driver and the messenger to throw up their hands, there was no mistaking the order. They knew that here was some extraordinary being confronting them.

An Amazing Bet

One day in Prescott, a tall fine looking but unkempt fellow, seemingly very drunk and acting like he had been drunk for several days, rolled a wagon wheel into a certain saloon and offered to bet a thousand dollars that he could swallow the wheel. After he had produced the money, the gamblers in the place, thinking that he was so drunk that he did not know what he was doing, covered the bet.

Then he offered to bet them five hundred more that they had made a bad bet. After all bets were covered and they were ready for the trial of the supposed drunken boaster, he quickly whipped out a six-gun and ordered everyone to reach for the sky. He scooped the money off the bar where it had been placed, and backed out of the saloon, and was on his horse and riding away before his dumbfounded audience and victims really awakened to the fact that they had been cleverly held up by Billy Brazelton.

One day, while the superintendent of the Congress, one of the richest gold mines in Arizona, was on his way to Prescott with gold bullion worth several thousand dollars, he was covered by a lone bandit and ordered to toss the gold from his wagon, which order he obeyed.

From the description of the bandit the law was sure that it was Brazelton, but he vanished, leaving no trail that the officers could follow.

During this period there were a number of army camps or posts located in Arizona and the payroll for all the soldiers located in the Territory amounted to a large sum of money. Consequently, when the paymaster traveled from one post to another with the

payroll, he was well protected. His escort usually consisted of a detachment of mounted soldiers. This detachment was usually from fifteen to twenty-five men, according to whether the Indians were at peace or on the war path. No one dreamed that a lone bandit would ever attempt to rob the paymaster with his escort of soldiers. Such a thing was unbelievable, but it is just what happened.

Early one morning, while the paymaster and his escort of ten soldiers were jogging along the road between Fort Bayard and Lordsburg, the entire outfit was thrown into confusion by the sudden appearance of a masked man, who commanded in a clear ringing voice: "Everybody, throw up your hands!"

They were caught off guard. The audacity of the robber dumbfounded the soldiers, just as it had the gamblers in the saloon. One soldiers did ask. "Who are you?"

"I'll show you who I am damn pronto," was the reply.

Being thus taken by surprise, and ordered by that commanding voice to get off their horses, they did, leaving their firearms on their saddles, and then had to stand helplessly by and see the lone bandit throw the money from the paymaster's wagon. After covering them with his gun, he ordered them to ride on.

[*Turn page*]

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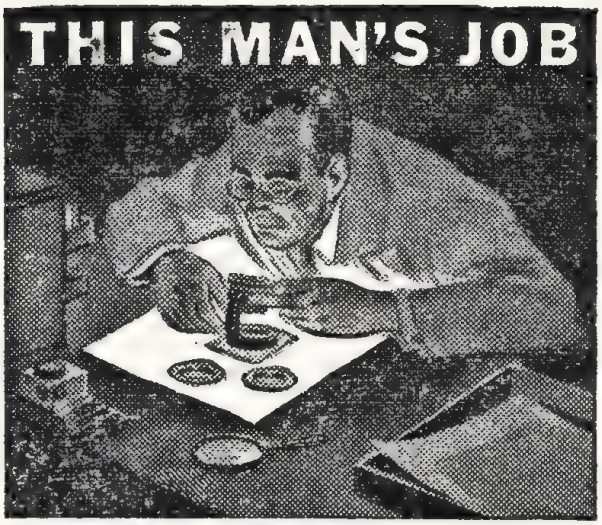

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The nerve of this nervy bandit surpasses understanding when one considers that he not only got away with this payroll robbery once but did it the second time at the same spot, and not long after the first robbery.

The same paymaster was on his way with practically the same escort, on a return trip from Fort Bayard, and as they reached the spot where the first hold-up occurred the paymaster remarked to a member of the party: "I think it was right here where the robber held me up." The words were hardly spoken when the highwayman came out from behind some brush.

"Yes, and I am here to hold you up again, and I want no fooling," he informed the paymaster.

Just how much money the bandit got in these two hauls was not known generally, but it was believed to be several thousand dollars. Following his usual method, after these robberies he disappeared again and nothing was heard of him for about two years.

An Ideal Spot for Trouble

Cook's Peak Canyon was one of the most desolate and barren places of its kind in the Southwest. For years it had been a death-trap to travelers, and the danger was greatly increased when the Indians were on the warpath.

The big boulders afforded an excellent place for ambush and protected by them, the Indians killed their unfortunate victims at will. It was always with a certain dread that men traveling back and forth, either by stage or immigration train, approached the place. It was an ideal spot for a stage robbery.

Aboard the stage one particular afternoon were four of the most prosperous and prominent men in New Mexico, and Brazelton knew of their presence. That was the secret of his success, finding out beforehand whom he had to rob.

One of the passengers was old John Chisholm, cattle king of Lincoln County. After Brazelton had lined up all the passengers on the roadside and they had deposited their money and jewelry on the ground, the robber turned to John Chisholm, and told him that he had failed to deposit all his money, saying: "I happen to know that you have a considerable amount in that belt underneath your vest, so just take it off."

When Chisholm asked him how he came to know about the money belt, he simply smiled and replied: "That's my business."

There was supposed to be ten thousand dollars in the money belt which Brazelton took from the cattle king. As soon as the job was completed once again Brazelton disappeared. Although many posses scoured the country in search of him, he could not

be found. It was thought that he went to San Francisco or some other city to have a big time on the hold-up money.

His Last Crime

The end came at last and by a peculiar coincidence it was the consequence of the first time he had ever worked other than alone. In some manner he teamed up with another highwayman, "California Joe." This was in 1879 and the stage that ran from Tucson, Arizona, to Nogales, Mexico, a border town, many times carried wealthy Mexican passengers traveling from Hermosillo and the rich gold mining districts of Altar, Sonora, Mexico. No robbery had ever been attempted on that stage run before although gold dust and bars worth thousands of dollars had been carried over the route many times.

It was with complete confidence that they would reach their destination in safety that a group of wealthy Mexicans left Nogales for the Arizona town. Everything went on smoothly and nicely until the stage reached a point about three miles south of the old mission of San Xavier.

There two horsemen, one from each side of the road, suddenly appeared and commanded: "Throw up your hands!"

The order was obeyed by the driver. The situation appeared to be under control of the highwaymen, when, suddenly two or

[*Turn page*]

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three shots came from the inside of the stage.

The robbers were surprised at this turn of affairs and Brazelton, true to the principle he had followed all through his career, determined not to take life if he could possibly avoid it.

Calling out to California Joe, "Don't shoot to kill, let's get out of here!" Brazelton triggered a few shots directed at the coach, seemingly to scare the passengers. Brazelton and his partner made their escape.

A Posse on the Trail

It was not long after the attempted holdup before the sheriff and a posse were on the trail of the bandits. They followed the trail into the mountains and there lost it, but an old Indian trailer with the posse noticed that one of the horses had lost half a shoe.

A week later this old Indian Trailer, Jesus Elles, was walking up Congress street when he noticed the same imprint upon the ground as the one he had found on the robbers' trail. He immediately notified the sheriff of his discovery, and informed the sheriff that he had trailed the horse to a certain corral.

The sheriff, with four men, went to the corral and waited quietly until the owner came for his horse. When he came they placed him under arrest. He was taken to jail and there he told of the secret hiding place of Brazelton and upon the promise of freedom if he would turn state's evidence against his partner and aid in his capture, "California Joe" led the sheriff and a posse of twelve men, armed to the teeth, to the hiding place of Brazelton.

When the posse was near the spot where the robber was concealed, "California Joe" whistled. The signal was answered and the party drew nearer.

They could see Brazelton with his back against a large tree reading a newspaper. He threw the paper aside and called out "Is that you, Joe?"

As Joe answered, twelve shots rang out, and the body of the bandit quivered for a moment and slumped to the ground.

One of the posse ran over to the fallen bandit and turned him over upon his back. As he did so, the robber opened his eyes for a moment, letting them rest upon his partner.

"Joe, you cowardly coyote, you gave me away," were the last words of the famous Lone Bandit of Arizona. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

Our Next Issue

WHAT happened to the fabulous fortunes of Emperor Montezuma II, the old Aztec ruler of Mexico, who was treacherously

imprisoned by the Spanish conqueror Cortes?

We know that Montezuma was slain by his own people when he asked them to put down the arms they had taken up against the Spaniards. We also know that Cortes found and stole much of the Aztec gold and jewelry. But some fortune was also spirited away and buried before the conquerors could grab it.

Down through the centuries have come wonderful stories of buried Aztec treasure. And now Chuck Martin brings the tale right up to the days of railroad building and vast cattle herds. His next Masked Rider novel is entitled MONTEZUMA'S GOLD—another fast-moving, powder-blazing, hard-riding yarn about Wayne Morgan and his inseparable saddle pard, Blue Hawk, the Yaqui.

We find them riding into a flaming Border feud between two great ranches, the Golden Ranch on the American side of the Line and the *Rancho del Oro* on the Mexican side. Western gunmen are in a death struggle with vaqueros. Cattle have been lost by both outfits, which at one time had been a partnership and now have taken up the rifle.

Over the struggle hangs the ghost of Montezuma and his buried treasure. The secret hiding place is guarded by an old Yaqui, who has discovered the identity of the Masked Rider, and Wayne Morgan realizes that his life is in peril.

The climax of the story comes in the Canyon of Death in the badlands, where the Masked Rider stumbles upon the rustlers. It is a battle to death—loaded with thrills and suspense, as fast a story as Chuck Martin has ever written. Here is but a small sample of what you may look forward to:

Wayne Morgan reached to his saddlebags and fumbled for the field glasses he had borrowed from Manuel Ortega. He cupped the strong glasses to his eyes and studied the slide intently, nodding his head as he checked the landmarks Blue Hawk had told him about.

Off to the right, there should be a growth of tamaracks and tulles which grew in the waste water from the deep pool before the waterfall. Blue Hawk had discovered a narrow twisting trail to the hidden canyon, not wide enough for a horse, but an agile man could worm his way through to the canyon floor.

Morgan located the place and lowered the glasses with a little grunt of satisfaction. Three

[*Turn page*]

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men could be enough for the job. Morgan called Juan Torres and old Manuel Ortega away from the group at the stream. He had made his choice for two reasons. Both Torres and Ortega were slender, and it would leave old Jim Bradshaw to lead the charge through the canyon, over the shaly slide.

Morgan explained his plan of attack, telling his two men they would have to make the rest of the way on foot. Juan Torres was agreeable and nodded silently as he checked the rifle old Jim had brought him. Manuel Ortega wanted more information. For a moment, Morgan was silent. His connection with Blue Hawk must remain a secret. Then Morgan smiled grimly. Blue Hawk and *Viejo* were both Yaquis. A half-truth would never be discovered.

"I learned of the secret trail from the Yaqui," he answered Ortega. "The three of us will make our way through and create a diversion. When the shooting starts, the two crews can ride over the slide. Their horses are fresh, but mine is about done in."

"As you say, Senor Morgan," Ortega agreed. Morgan walked back to the group to explain his plan.

"Jim Bradshaw will lead the *vaqueros* and fan out to the right when you reach the canyon floor," Morgan said slowly. "The sheriff will lead the G Bar R crew and take off to the left. The sheriff can suit himself about taking prisoners, but after the smoke clears away, round up the cattle and don't let them scatter to the badlands."

Sheriff Tom Walker smiled and nodded approval. He told Morgan that he was glad to have some one help him with his work who knew

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what it was all about. Signals were arranged. The two crews were checking their guns and slipping extra cartridges from their belts into their pockets. Cinches were tightened. Wayne Morgan mounted his weary horse. The attack on the Canyon of Death was about to get under way!

So there is the beginning of the big fight, readers! The big fight you'll read about in that grand full-length yarn, MONTEZUMA'S GOLD! And there will be other stories and features, too, next issue. A gala number you're sure to enjoy!

Our Letter Box

IT'S PLUMB interesting to see how our correspondents take up a word as quick as a wink when they read this column. All a letter writer has to do is put his chin out a very small way, and *bang!* somebody fires at the target. The first letter we print today is a fine example.

In OUR LETTER BOX a correspondent made the following statement—"I would like to know why Wayne Morgan doesn't tell everyone he is the Masked Rider when his fighting is done." Well, that just put my brain to work. And this is my conclusion—

Since the Masked Rider is supposed to be an outlaw with a big reward on his head, Wayne Morgan would have to assume another name if he were to continue his good work. He would also have to change his appearance so that it wouldn't tally with the reward posters that are out for his capture.

I have finished the last issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN and think it is tops.

—*Leona Rumker, Hot Springs, Ark.*

And here is a letter that invites comments from our readers:

I like MASKED RIDER WESTERN more than any other magazine that I have read. OKLAHOMA GUN SONG, RAIDERS OF RIFLE ROCK, GHOST GUNS, BRAND OF THE UNKNOWN and DEATH IN THE SADDLE were fine stories.

Now for a little criticism. I think Blue Hawk should have a bigger part in the stories, and I think that Midnight should be taught to come at a whistle. Wayne Morgan should be suspected as he was in BRAND OF THE UNKNOWN.

However, I still like MASKED RIDER WESTERN best of all.

—*Harold Duke, Waring, Tex.*

Another writer takes an opposite view:

Don't you think that Wayne Morgan could solve all his troubles by his lonesome? Why does he need an Indian to help him out? Blue Hawk might be a good friend, and I have nothing against him, but I think it would be better to have the Masked Rider fight entirely on his own.

—*Sam Workman, Duluth, Minn.*

[*Turn page*]

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This reader tells us that everything is okay:

I read the last issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN and like it swell. Some of my favorite authors are Walker A. Tompkins, Charles N. Hecklemann and Lee E. Wells. In an old issue was one of the best Western stories I have ever read. It was BULLET HARVEST FOR RENEGADES. Well, *adios*, partner.
—*Arthur Bloomer, Bellaire, Kan.*

So that is the way it goes, hombres. Some readers don't like everything about the Masked Rider, while others don't want any changes. We take all these letters and add them up to see which side is winning. And then we either keep everything about MASKED RIDER WESTERN the way it is, or we make a change. Anyway, your letters guide us in planning future issues—and that's why they're so important.

Yes folks, your letters help the magazine. Why not sit down and write us right now? We'll be waiting to hear from you. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Thanks, everybody!

—THE EDITOR

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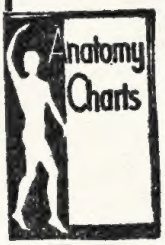
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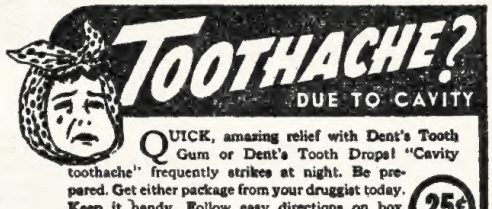

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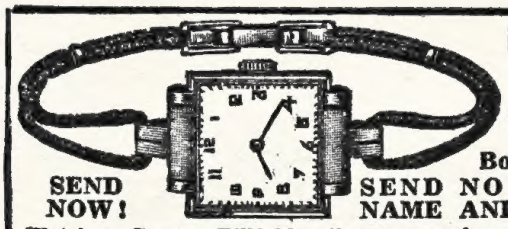

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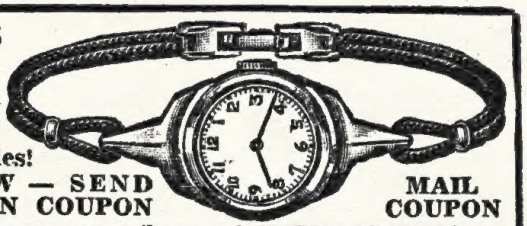

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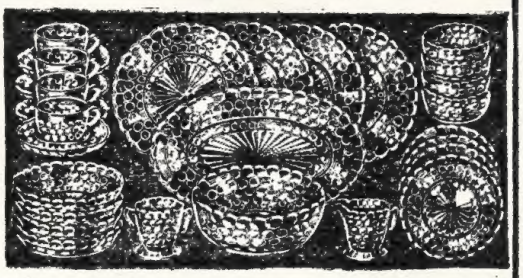

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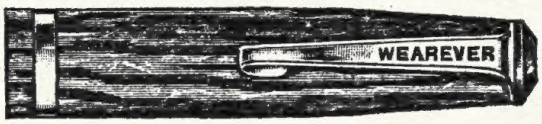
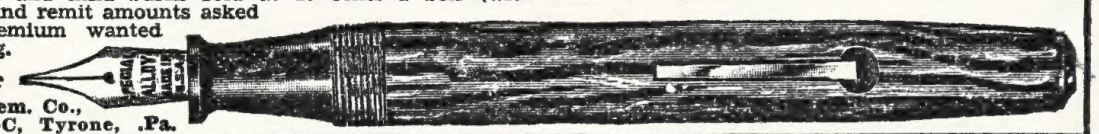




50th Year

Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. 31-C, Tyrone, Pa.

Premiums OR CASH GIVEN

SEND NAME & ADDRESS

Boys - Girls! Billfolds, and other personal and household premiums easily yours!

Simply Give picture with White **Cloverine** Brand **Salve** at 25c a box (with picture) and remit amounts asked under premium wanted in catalog. Mail coupon now!

Send No Money Now

Wilson Chemical Co., Dept. 31-D, Tyrone. Pa.

Our 50th Year

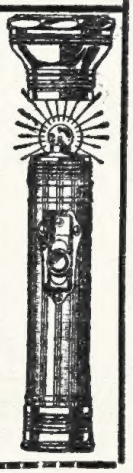
Sold thru Agents & Drug Stores

PREMIUMS Or Cash Given

Watches, Flashlights, Rings, School Boxes, other premiums easily yours! **SIMPLY GIVE** pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand **SALVE** for chaps, sold at 25c **a** box (with picture) and remit amounts called for under premium wanted in catalog. Mail coupon now!

Send No Money Now

Wilson Chem. Co. Dept. 31-E, Tyrone, Pa.



MAIL COUPON NOW

Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. TG-31, Tyrone, Pa... Date.....

Gentlemen:—Please send me on trial to start twelve colorful art pictures with twelve boxes White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (with picture). I will remit amounts asked within 30 days, select a premium or keep a cash commission as fully explained under premium wanted in catalog sent with order, postage paid.

Name ..... Age.....

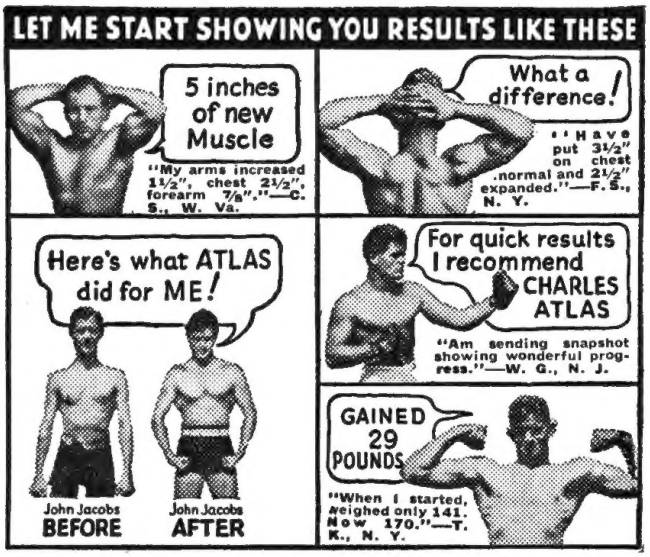
St. ..... RD.....Box.....

Town.....Zone No..... State.....

Print Last Name Here

Paste coupon on postal card or mail in an envelope today

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*


LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE
5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"."—C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"I have put 3½" on chest normal and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension"** you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body — watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid MUSCLE.

My method—**"Dynamic Tension"**—will turn the trick for you. No theory — every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from - the - shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today, AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 7711A, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 7711A
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

HOSPITAL and DOCTOR BILLS PAID!

HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

COVERS SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

• Do you know that an average of one person out of every ten becomes a hospital patient each year? More than 35,000 patients enter hospitals daily. You, or one of your family might be next! Don't go into debt or bankrupt your savings when Sickness or Accident strikes. Be prepared — protect yourself NOW!

PAYS BENEFITS FROM FIRST DAY

This dependable Hospitalization Plan PAYS YOUR BILLS FROM THE VERY FIRST DAY of Hospitalization, exactly as provided. Do not confuse this policy with the others that skip paying benefits for the first 7 or 14 days.

PAYS FOR LOSS OF INCOME!

In addition to Hospital and Doctor Benefits cash payment will be made for LOSS of TIME from work, due to accident disability, at the rate of $25 a week up to a total of $300.00, as stated in the liberal Loss of Time provision of the contract.

ISSUED TO INDIVIDUALS or FAMILIES

You or members of your family may be protected against Hospitalization resulting from Sickness or Accident. Everyone, in good health, from 6 months to 70 years of age can apply for policy.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN HOSPITAL and DOCTOR

Any recognized Hospital and any Doctor in the United States or Canada may be selected by you. You are not required to enter any particular Hospital under this liberal Hospitalization plan.

No Medical Examination—No Red Tape—No Agents

No medical examination is required. If you are in good health we take your word for it. Red tape as well as agents eliminated!

FREE INFORMATION—NO OBLIGATION

Send no money — just mail the coupon. We will send you complete details and 10 day FREE Inspection offer. DON'T DELAY!

GEORGE ROGERS CLARK CASUALTY COMPANY
4066 Insurance Exch. Bldg., Rockford, Ill.

GET FREE FACTS

3¢ costs about A DAY

POLICY PAYS
Hospital and Doctor Bills up to

$6.00 Each Day HOSPITAL $1080.00
Maximum Benefit for Room, Board, General Nursing for each insured adult. Includes up to 90 days per year for Accident and up to 90 days per year for Sickness.

$25 Each Week LOSS of TIME $300
From work, by Accident up to 12 weeks.

DOCTOR EXPENSES $135.00
Maximum benefit for additional Medical or Surgical care while in Hospital due to injuries.

$1000.00
ACCIDENTAL LOSS of LIFE, LIMBS or ENTIRE SIGHT

Many other liberal benefits. All as plainly stated in Policy.

MAIL COUPON NOW

George Rogers Clark Casualty Company
4066 Insurance Exch. Bldg., Rockford, Ill.

Please rush FREE information about Hospital and Doctor's Expense Policy.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY & STATE.....

Fill in coupon. Clip and paste to Postal Card or mail in envelope.